Charter Schools: Creating and Sustaining Family Friendly Schools

Charter Friends

National Network

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Andrew joined Designs for Learning in 1993, during the initial implementation of the Community Learning Centers project under New American Schools sponsorship. Andrew's work has involved education-related research; writing of materials such as grant/contract proposals, research and evaluation reports, and promotional materials; and administrative tasks such as communicating with clients, assisting with hiring support staff, and managing the company's extensive information databases. He has co-authored publications on school vouchers, on charter school laws across the states, and on parent involvement in charter schools. Since 1996, the focus of Andrew's work has shifted toward charter public schools. As a project coordinator, Andrew took part in all aspects of start-up for these new programs, including preparing proposals to sponsors, promotion/publicity, obtaining 501(c)3 status, fundraising, recruiting and hiring staff, and recruiting students.

Nancy Smith
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Introduction

This Guidebook is intended to help charter school developers and operators in their efforts to promote family and community involvement in charter schools. We begin with a discussion of involving families and community in the development and start-up phase. Next there is a section, the longest in the Guidebook, on involving families in schools. Third, we consider strategies for communicating with parents and community about the school. Fourth is a discussion of improving responsiveness to stakeholders, including means of soliciting input. We conclude with a list of further resources, many available online. It is the authors' hope that charter school developers and operators will use this book to increase student achievement, improve student behaviors, increase the richness of the curriculum and create solid parent support for the schools.

There is clear and compelling evidence of the importance of parental actions on children's achievement in school. In their *New Generation of Evidence* study, education researchers Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla found that:

- First, the family makes critical contributions to student achievement, from earliest childhood through high school.
- Second, when parents are involved at school, not just at home, children do better in school and they stay in school longer.
- Third, when parents are involved at school, their children go to better schools (when parents are involved in different roles throughout the school, the performance of all children in the school tends to improve).
- Fourth, children do best when their parents are enabled to play four key roles in their children's learning: teachers, supporters, advocates, and decision-makers.
- Fifth, the more the relationship between family and school approaches a comprehensive, well-planned partnership, the higher the student achievement.
- Sixth, families, schools, and community organizations all contribute to student achievement; the best results come when all three work together (Henderson and Berla, 1995, pp. 14-16).

Family involvement expert Joyce Epstein has noted that one of the best indicators of parent involvement is what a school does to promote it. Furthermore, charter schools that are in the development phase have the opportunity to consult with parents and local groups in designing and creating their programs.

A recent publication of the National Parent Teacher Association states that "the most accurate predictors of student achievement in school are not family income or social status, but the extent to which a student's family is able to 1) create a home environment that encourages learning; 2) communicate high, yet reasonable expectations for the child's achievement and future career; and 3) become involved in the child's education at school and in the community." Student behavior also tends to improve when a student's family is actively involved in school (National PTA, 2000, pp. 11-12).

This same book also reports that more needs to be done to promote parent involvement. A 1998 PTA survey of parents found: "only 29% of parents…felt teachers and principals had a lot of good ideas about how to involve parents, and only 38% felt that they actually had a lot of input in their children's education." A 1999 Public Agenda poll found that 98% of teachers and 87% parents agree that "it is always the same group of parents who are involved in school activities" (Public Agenda, 1999, p. 38, available online at http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/parent/parent.htm).

The authors believe charter schools hold great promise for reforming the American system of public education, and that part of their promise rests on their ability to involve parents and the community in constructive ways. Some charter schools are started by parents, and many involve parents extensively in their everyday operations. As schools of choice, charter schools have to win and maintain families' approval in order to keep students enrolled. This Guidebook will help charter developers and operators develop family-friendly charter schools.

To produce this report, the authors reviewed recent literature on parent involvement in education, reviewed materials produced by charter school assistance organizations, and contacted staff at various charter schools around the country. Most of the examples come from Minnesota because these are the schools with which the authors are most familiar, but we believe similar things are happening elsewhere. The schools we contacted outside Minnesota were identified by those states' charter assistance organization staff as schools that were notably successful in involving parents and/or community. For specific schools, we include contact information (addresses and Internet sites when available) the first time a school is mentioned.

I. Involving Families and Community in the Design and Development Phase

One of the aims of the charter schools movement has been to involve parents, local organizations, and others from outside the ranks of the "education establishment." However, when new charter schools are begun, the overall design for the school is often pre-determined rather than developed with family and community input. Charter designs are usually the brainchild of a single visionary or small group. Often charter schools represent an effort to put in place an already-established curriculum model, while conversion charter schools often largely keep in place the learning program from before the conversion. Increasingly, charter schools are being started by organizations such as the Edison Project which provide a ready-made program to be implemented. Here are some thoughts on getting parents involved even when you're starting with a well-developed idea:

- Market test your ideas with parents to make sure you're developing something that will attract customers.
- Focus input-gathering on issues where you're not sure what you want to do (in effect, use input to help resolve controversies or uncertainties).

- Keep in mind that most prepackaged and visionary school designs, even if labeled as "comprehensive," don't cover every single aspect of the school. There is usually room around the edges for tailoring to local preferences, and this is a great place for community input. For example, Core Knowledge says that its curriculum is only intended to serve as 50% of a school's program -- so the other 50% can be more responsive to local ideas. And the Core Knowledge program doesn't say anything about what kind of sports program you should have, how the school should be governed, etc.

The authors believe that it is important to involve parents in the design phase of a new charter school. This chapter begins with a discussion of ways to learn about your prospective families' needs and expectations. Next is a discussion of involving parents and community groups in the actual process of starting up a new school.

A. Strategies for Learning About Parent/Family Needs and Expectations About Education

Whether a school's program is pre-determined or developed by the founders as part of the start-up process, it makes sense for charter school developers to gain an understanding of the community the school will be serving. What are families' expectations about education? Are these expectations not being met by the existing public schools? What are some of the ways a charter school can better meet family needs and expectations?

The Charter Schools Project at Duquesne University recommends that *the charter school founders have a thorough knowledge of their school community and have used it in developing their school* (Duquesne University Charter Schools Project, 1998, http://www.bus.duq.edu/Charter/). The "Quality Indicator" for community and parent engagement states that

Founders can demonstrate this by:

- Sharing the school's mission and vision with the community and parents, explaining program content, achievement objectives, and the rationale for the instructional strategies selected;
- Assessing community group, parent and general public opinion about the school through such means as surveys, public meetings and focus or study groups;
- Engaging in coalition building and the development of collaborations;
- Describing opportunities for community and parent engagement and participation in the design and operation of the school;
- Pursuing and securing agreements with the school district and with local businesses and agencies for services and support; and
- Including [in the charter application] letters of support or other evidence of community, parent, and student support for the school.

How one Minnesota charter school researched parents' and families' educational needs and expectations prior to beginning its program

Sojourner Truth Academy, a K-6 school in Minneapolis, which promotes academic excellence for all students through Direct Instruction and Afro centric curriculum strived to involve parents in the very beginning design process for the school. Sojourner founders did research on parent and family needs and expectations through telephone surveys and written surveys. Through this process, they discovered that 95% of the parents surveyed agreed that their school should address three need areas: (1) strong academics; (2) discipline and a safe school environment; and (3) effective communication between home and school. These three areas became the guiding principles for staff at Sojourner Truth.

Sojourner Truth is located at 3820 Emerson Avenue North; Minneapolis, MN 55412.

On the other hand, there is a danger that this process may lead to schools only slightly different than conventional models as that is what parents are familiar with. Sharply differing philosophies about education could become homogenized and truly unique models lost. This problem can be overcome if sufficient time is devoted to examining a range of educational models and outlying views. One of the strengths of the charter movement is that smaller based constituencies favoring models such as Waldorf, Montessori or other non-mainstream approaches have their opportunities to start charter schools without being swept aside by a more middle-of-the-road majority.

A couple specific strategies for gathering parent input are by conducting surveys of potential parents, and inviting potential parents to participate in focus groups. Processes for conducting surveys and focus groups are discussed below, in Section IV.

B. Involving Parents in Designing and Starting New Charter Schools

This section suggests ways to vigorously involve parents in the process of designing and starting a new school. The National Study of Charter Schools recently reported that the most common reason schools are started (cited by 75.2% of charter operators surveyed as of the 1998-99 school year) is to "realize an alternative vision," while only 8.9% of the 971 charter operators surveyed cited parent involvement as a reason for creating a charter school.[1] It's probably safe to say that most charter schools are started by a committed individual or very small group that has a vision for the school and then finds others to help implement it.

Still, charter schools must attract parents to maintain enrollment. The school originators can enhance their chances of obtaining enrollment by involving parents early on.

[1] U.S. Department of Education, 2000, http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter4thyear/, p. 42.

Several of the charter operators the authors interviewed indicated that parents and community groups were involved in starting their schools. Comments included:

- We held meetings in the neighborhoods - talked at Boys' and Girls' Clubs;
- We asked community members to give input though community meetings we arranged; parents were instrumental in the creation and the desire for our school; and
- We had public meetings one year before we opened, which helped us come up with our vision.

It makes sense for charter founders to think through the types of parent involvement desired, both in the design/start-up phase and in school operations. Kansas superintendent Rustin Clark, in a December 1999 posting to a national charter schools listserv, suggested charter school people consider the following questions about parent involvement:

- What activities should parents be involved with in this school?
- To what extent should parents be involved in deciding curriculum?
- For those who feel curriculum should be left to school personnel, how do you provide for parents' input without undermining the professionalism and knowledge of the trained educators?
- For those who feel the parents should be deciding the curriculum for their children, how do you go about doing this when parents have no professional training and have such a wide variety of desires for their students?
- Should parents be involved in setting discipline policy for a school?
- Should parents have a say in the hiring/firing of school personnel?

Parents, of course, have a vital interest in their child's education. Their interests range from bus schedules or lunch program to philosophical theories about learning. The more educated and successful the parent, the more insistent, even demanding, their involvement becomes. A school will be in much better shape with strong parental and community support born of early participation in the school's planning.

Specific strategies for involving parents

Minnesota Charter School Involved Parents from the Very Beginning

Founders at Sojourner Truth Academy, an urban elementary school serving 225 students -- 99% who are students of color (primarily African-American) and 90% who are eligible for free or reduced price school meals--were serious about involving families in the design of the school. Parents were part of the original founders' group. Along with the director of the school, they visited other charter schools in Washington, D.C. and Phoenix, AZ, a year before their own school opened. Parents staffed the curriculum review committee, helped to arrange parent meetings, developed and carried out student recruitment, assisted the director in searching for a site for the school, cleaned the school and painted walls and carpeted floors. Sojourner Truth Academy parents are now employed at the school in the office, lunchroom, and as teacher assistants.

Here are some suggestions for involving parents and community in the early stages, adapted from the New Jersey Charter Schools Handbook (Charter School Resource Center, 1998, p. 28):

- Starting a charter school is a community-building process. Community outreach and marketing must begin at conception. Cultivating a network of partners and supporters begins at the moment you

decide to start a charter school and it never ends. Once you agree on a mission, this committee can create materials to "get the word out" – from posters to flyers to brochures to newsletters and beyond….;

- A committee can be responsible for working with the media. See "Public Relations;"
- Remember that educational jargon – like any other kind of jargon – can be off-putting. Strive for clarity and simplicity in your messages to the public;
- Solid outreach efforts will enable you to reach a cross-section of the population and will lead to stronger commitments from those who get involved in your school; and
- Be sure to provide refreshments at meetings.

Jerri Morrison, director of Trenton Community Charter School in New Jersey, suggests ways to recruit a broad cross-section of the community.[2]

1. Advertise on large community billboards;
2. Public service announcements on radio stations;
3. Public service announcements on local cable TV stations;
4. Form a committee to implement recruitment plan;
5. Place a public service and/or paid advertisement in local newspapers;
6. Place flyers in local supermarkets and other stores, including corner stores;
7. Mail flyers to social service agencies (welfare, UPI, DYFS), sororities, fraternities, affordable housing organizations, and civic organizations, e.g. MECHA, Urban League, NAACP, and Habitat for Humanity;
8. Mail flyers to pastors of congregations and also to the "education coordinator," Sunday school teachers, and children's choir director. Ask for message to be read aloud during services;
9. Ask that time be allowed for a charter school representative to speak at churches (5-10 minutes);
10. Knock on doors in pairs and be prepared to sit and "visit for a few minutes" if allowed to discuss ideas;
11. Include teenagers in door-to-door advertisement;
12. Place posters in bars, barber shops, beauty shops, nail salons, and laundromats;
13. Place posters in children's clothing stores in downtown areas;
14. Place posters in check-cashing centers, PSE&G, and courthouse;
15. Visit check-cashing centers on the first of the month;
16. Place advertisements in day care centers. Ask to meet with parents of day care children;
17. Place flyers in hospitals and health clinics;
18. Place flyers in after-school academic and recreational programs;
19. Mail to each PTA/PTO organization and other parent organizations;
20. Participate in ethnic parades (banners); and
21. Visit homeless shelters.

Once you've done the initial work of planning the school program, you'll want to recruit a cross-section of the community to support the school, participate in start-up activities and ultimately to send students.

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[2] Reprinted in Charter School Resource Center, 1998, p. 30; used by permission.

The New Jersey Charter Schools Handbook recommends establishing a community outreach and marketing committee to take charge of this process.

With outreach efforts, an important goal is promoting an accurate understanding of what your charter school is about. It's not necessary for charter schools to be all things to all parents and the clearer you are about your program, the more likely you are to find families who will stick with the school for the long term. The lesson: be exceptionally clear about the school's mission and philosophy of education.

Finally, two topics relevant to involving parents in the start-up phase for new charter schools are effective meeting format and the role of parents with regard to educational innovation.

Effective parent meetings

To involve parents in ways they find satisfying, you'll want to devote some thought to making the meetings as effective as possible. Teacher and curriculum developer James Vopat offers the following suggestions on making meetings, or parent "workshops" convenient and productive.[3]

- *Size*. Workshop size can vary, but when the number of participants exceeds twenty-five, it is a good idea to split the large group into smaller groups for sharing and discussion. The smaller groups can then report to the larger group for closure and continuity.
- *Place*. A stimulating, comfortable schoolroom or library is a conducive place to hold the workshops. The room should be able to accommodate participants' movement between small and large groups and needs to have seating that can be arranged in a circle….while there are great advantages to holding the workshops in a school classroom, workshops should never be conducted in a way that treats parents like students or makes them feel like they have been sent back to grade school.
- *Child care*. We provide on-site childcare for children of all participants, including teachers.
- *Transportation*. Naturally, the workshops cannot occur if the parents are unable to get there. We try to arrange car pools, and when this fails, we budget funds for transportation (usually by taxi).
- *Multilingual workshops*. Generally, teachers and parents can handle the translation between languages. It is important that the group reflects the cultural makeup of the school population…It takes a little more time to conduct multilingual workshops, but it is entirely worth it. The added benefit is that everyone also learns to appreciate different cultures and languages.

At Sojourner Truth Academy, founders organized parent meetings a year before the school actually opened. At one of their largest pre-opening parent meetings, 100 parents, children, and community members showed up in one of the worst snowstorms of 1999 to hear Dr. Alan Jackson, director of ATOP Academy, a charter school in Phoenix, Arizona, tell the story of his school. Parents were informed about the meeting largely through flyers, which were posted at community organization offices, barbershops, beauty shops, and churches. Parents called other parents 2 - 3 times to encourage and

[3] Excerpted from discussion in Vopat, 1994, pp. 15-18.

confirm their attendance. Sojourner Truth Academy works hard to get parents to attend meetings because they believe parent involvement happens only when schools initiate it.

Parents and educational innovation

Most charter schools are devoted to some type of reform in educational methods. The federally-funded National Study of Charter Schools found that as of the 1998-99 school year, 75% of charter schools cited "realize an alternative vision" as a reason for starting the school; 59% cited this as the most important reason. But are most parents likely to support these alternative visions? Parents are often seen as skeptical about curriculum reform, preferring traditional methods in education. The Best Practice Project in Chicago confronted this issue head-on, and succeeded in building support among parents for innovations in instruction.

The experience of the Best Practice Project may be instructive for many charter developers seeking to build understanding and support for innovative methods. Below we quote at length from an exciting article that summarized the process used.[4]

Harvey Daniels, director of the Best Practices Project, comments,
Teachers see headlines about parent groups censoring books, protesting whole language, filing lawsuits for more phonics, and otherwise colliding with the professional educators in their community. Indeed, many otherwise reform-minded teachers see parents as a regressive force.

"When our project staff first enter a school, many parents present us with a reactionary, back-to-basics agenda. We have come to understand, however, that often they are merely mimicking the media banalities in which we all marinate. When they stop to think seriously about their own student experience, the vast majority wants something very different and better for their children.

To surface this latent reformist spirit, we have developed a workshop and offered it to thousands of parents. Whether it's at a school board or PTA meeting or parent council, in an affluent suburb or inner-city housing project it has never failed to build solidarity and commitment to student-centered methods and new curricula. Here's what we do.

We begin by handing out large index cards and invite everyone to think back over their development as a reader and writer (or their growth in math, science, the arts, or other subjects). We then ask the group to take about 10 minutes to jot down words, phrases, or doodles as particular moments or events come to mind. To help, the workshop facilitator throws out lots of open-ended questions, such as:

- What was your favorite book as a child? Who read to you?
- What do you remember about learning to read in school?
- Can you remember a time when you really soared as a reader?
- What was the role of writing in your family?

[4] Daniels, 1996; used by permission of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

- What was the worst response you ever got to a paper you wrote?
- Can you remember a setback or discouragement you experienced as a writer?
- Did you ever get recognized or rewarded for your writing?
- If you went to college, what was freshman English like?

Next, we ask everyone to look over their notes and select the one incident they remember most vividly. We stress that this can be a good or bad experience. We then ask them to turn over their cards and take 10 minutes or so to describe this experience.

Once they've finished, people pair up with someone nearby and share any aspect of the experience they feel comfortable disclosing. They can read what they've written, summarize it, or talk about something they've just noticed about this writing process. At this point, there's usually a swiftly rising hum as participants, first tentatively and then enthusiastically, swap stories with newfound friends.

We then regather the group and ask a few people to share their recollections – or, with permission, their partner's – with everyone. What unfolds are two kinds of stories: accounts of positive literacy experiences, where the person was well-supported and moved ahead; and tales of very destructive experiences, which discouraged the person from reading and writing, sometimes for good. Strikingly and sadly, the hurtful experiences usually occurred in school; and the positive experiences, elsewhere.

At some point during this sharing, we may interrupt by saying something like, "Gee, we didn't realize that you had been reading the literature on curriculum and instruction reform." As they give us a puzzled look, we hand out summaries of recent educational research on the subject being considered that evening – reading, writing, math, history, or science. We point out that most of the good experiences people recounted are reflected in the recommendations for progressive practice, whether from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the International Reading Association, or the Center for the Study of Writing. We note, too, that many of the not-so-pleasant experiences – that is, teaching approaches that didn't work – represent the direct opposite of the practices endorsed."

The author goes on to describe the growing enthusiasm of parents to try new ideas – a complete reversal from when they entered the meeting.

Parents overcome education establishment inertia to found a new school

An early example of parent involvement in starting an innovative new school was the *St. Paul Open School*. A group of parents in St. Paul, Minnesota began talking about creating a new kind of school in 1970, one less structured than the straight row of desks and textbook bound schools their children attended. They visited creative schools where ever they could find them. They took photos, conducted interviews, distributed their notes, called meetings and in an ever widening circle of other parents pledged themselves to developing a new kind of school.

They brought their ideas to school officials and were largely rebuffed. They lobbied school board members without much success. Then they asked permission to write a proposal in the name of the district to establish such a school with a federal grant. District officials agreed, thinking it would never be funded. While the federal grant was being processed the group convinced a local foundation to match the federal grant if funded. The federal grant was approved. The local foundation matched. A new St. Paul superintendent agreed and convinced the school board to approve the school.

Thus began the K-12 St. Paul Open School, for 500 students in 1971. It became one of the most celebrated successes with over 10,000 visitors in the first ten years. It is now in its 29th year because of the continuing and zealous work of parents in establishing and guarding the program.

The St. Paul Open School is located at 90 S. Western Street, St. Paul, MN 55102.

Parent support vital in the creation of one of the nation's most innovative charters

Minnesota New Country School, nestled in a small river valley in southwestern Minnesota, is a small charter school serving 150 middle school and high school students from several surrounding towns. This small technology-infused school has no classrooms and has a curriculum tightly aligned to the state standards. Students, parents, and teachers design project-based learning plans. Every six weeks students give a report or performance on their projects.

When Minnesota New Country school developers first began talking about the vision for the school, they held information meetings around the community. They spoke to the rotary club, town meetings, etc. to get the word out far and wide. In this process, they drew in a group of parents who seven years later remain wedded to the school's vision and remain as the backbone of the school.

New Country School can be reached at P.O. Box 488; Henderson, MN 56044, or online at http://mncs.k12.mn.us/.

C. Engagement of Grassroots Community Organizations in Charter Design and Start-up

Communities offer a wide range of resources that are valuable to schools and the families they serve. These resources include people who volunteer their time in the school, organizations that offer enrichment opportunities, businesses that offer career-related information and workplace experiences, and agencies that provide various social services for students and families.[5]

Engaging community organizations in designing and starting a new school can provide many opportunities. You'll gain access to a variety of new perspectives, and staff at existing organizations may be able to provide resources that will help the school.

At most of the charter schools contacted during the research for this project, interviewees indicated that organizations in the community had been involved in the start-up process. A wide range of organizations was cited, including the mayor and city council, the local Urban League, local universities, community-based arts organizations, the local Elks Lodge, and a local museum.

The community supports a charter conversion

When Nerstrand Elementary school in Nerstrand, Minnesota decided to covert from a district to charter school in 1999, they decided to hold a community celebration of place as a way to involve the entire community in this process. Children, families, and elders attended the event, which was also a celebration of the community taking back ownership of what had once been their community school.

Every segment of the community was there to celebrate from families and their children to elders, businesses, and just interested townsfolk. The local businesses had been part of the charter school's planning meetings and had given verbal and fiscal support. When the school submitted its application for charter school authorization to the state board, the local bank and other businesses attached letters of support.

First inventory local human services providers, public and private, businesses, nonprofits, and other local organizations (e.g. neighborhood associations, religious organizations, chambers of commerce), with special attention to ones people involved with in the charter start-up group have had contact with. Let them know that a new school is being developed. You can request their mentioning it at meetings or ask if they would like to be involved and to distribute information. You might ask about level of

[5] North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1998; http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa400.htm.

involvement, i.e. be kept informed, to participate in planning, or to form working partnerships, at least on a preliminary basis. The "Cooperating Organizations" form, immediately below, may serve as the template for a planning worksheet for tracking potential resources.

Planning Worksheet for Tracking Potential Resources:
XYZ Charter School Cooperating Organizations

Name and address	Contact person/phone	Type of involvement desired	Record of contacts
1.			
2.			
3. etc.			

When you make clear that your focus is on providing another educational option and to offer new opportunities for children, you will usually find local organizations that are supportive of the effort. Rex Brown of Denver's P.S. 1 charter school reported that during start-up the founders talked to over 200 neighborhood groups, organizations, and businesses. "They were just unsatisfied with the system, and they had a desire for better schools for their children," he added.

"When getting organizations involved in initial meetings, you need to clearly outline what you want from the relationship - what do you expect of them? Will it be an ongoing or temporary partnership? What would be the connection between the school and the organization? These are important considerations before you begin the process of parent and community involvement in your school."
– Paige Andrews, director of Sojourner Truth Charter

Here are examples of three charter schools started by community organizations:

The **Minnesota American Indian Aids Task Force** (MAIATF), a Minneapolis-based AIDS prevention organization, had been operating an after-school and summer youth theater group to pitch AIDS awareness among peers for nearly 10 years when they decided to turn their successes into a full-time charter school program several years ago. This American Indian community-based group has developed the **Native American Arts High School**, which will serve 100 high school students from the Philips neighborhood, one of the lowest-income areas in the city. The founders' group made up of MAIATF staff members, parents, teachers, and Phillips community members developed a program based on theatrical and visual arts because they know from years of experience of running a community-based program that this approach works to motivate American Indian students to achieve academically. This unique charter school is scheduled to open in the fall of 2000. They will open in a state-owned historic site, and they will house an art gallery and gift shop, which will be student run. Visiting artists and local American Indian artists will teach classes in theater, drawing, painting, dance, and music. This community driven school plans to continue to involve community in its ongoing operations.

Another charter school initiated by a community organization is **Four Directions Charter School**, a small high school located in the near north community of Minneapolis. The focus of the school is to improve academic achievement for American Indian high school students who've fallen through the

cracks of the larger public school system by providing culture-rich curriculum, smaller classrooms, and caring and understanding teachers.

Four Directions Charter School grew out of the education work of the Upper Midwest American Indian Center, a 40-year-old agency providing social services to American Indian families in Minneapolis. Upper Midwest had operated an alternative learning site for 20 American Indian students and an after-school tutoring program for elementary aged students for 10 years prior to starting the development of the charter school. They were driven to start the charter school because they had a huge waiting list for their high school alternative site – American Indian parents were hammering to get their students into this program which graduated as many students as another site serving six times as many students per year. Parent and community concerns led the board of Upper Midwest to begin work on starting the charter school that would focus on the needs of their community.

Parents, community members, and board members of the south Minneapolis based **Centro Culturo Chicano** social services agency began this same journey in 1998, as well. This organization was concerned about the lack of appropriate bilingual educational services for the burgeoning Chicano/Latino school-age population in south Minneapolis. Centro Culturo Chicano had been operating a pre-school to prepare their children for kindergarten in the mainstream public schools. Parents and community members asked that they go a step further to start a school for pre-school through the third grade to prepare students to transition into the mainstream public schools.

In answer to this parent and community request, Centro Culturo Chicano has developed, in partnership with a higher-education sponsor, the **Aurora Charter School**, a unique bicultural, biliteral program for K-3rd grade students. This parent and community inspired program promises to be a new voice in changing bilingual, bicultural, biliteral education to fit the needs of native speaking students.

The Native American Arts High School is located at 1433 E. Franklin Avenue, Suite 19; Minneapolis, MN 55404. Four Directions Charter School is at 1035 W. Broadway Avenue; Minneapolis, MN 55411. Aurora Charter School can be reached at 7608 67th Avenue NW; Brooklyn Park, MN 55428.

II. Involving Families in Schools

This section focuses on ways parents and families may support their charter schools, and schools' support to families. In particular, the authors wish to make two recommendations for strategies that have proven effective in building parent understanding and support:

- First, *start the year with a family-student-teacher conference*, in which educators and parents meet to plan out the year. This helps parents understand the program, and helps teachers understand the circumstances and needs of particular families. Meeting with parents

before the school year requires a major reallocation of education time, but the schools which have done it report good outcomes.

- Second, *hold regularly-scheduled parent meetings*. To keep parents engaged with the school, it is crucial that there be some school event to which they come on a regular basis, monthly or at least bi-monthly. This could be a potluck dinner followed by a presentation on an aspect of the school program, could include learning activities for both parents and students, or could incorporate student performances or presentations.

If a school starts the year with a conference, and have regular, well-attended parent meetings, family involvement of all sorts will be more apt to flourish.

There are four sub-sections to this chapter. The first discusses types of parent involvement, following the framework developed by parent involvement expert Joyce Epstein. Director of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, Epstein is one of the nation's most respected researchers on the topic of connections among school, family, and community. Next, there's a discussion of potential *challenges* to effective parental involvement, and strategies schools may use to overcome them. Third, there is a section discussing parent/family resource centers, which many charter schools have implemented as a service to parents. Finally, there is a discussion of training school staff in effective parent involvement.

A. Ways in Which Families May Be Involved

The needs and interests of different groups of parents are usually a better starting point than the school's agenda when beginning parent involvement projects. When the school offers many different sorts of activities, parents can enter the school world in a way that is most comfortable or more interesting to them.[6]

This was one of the conclusions of a report on New York City's Parent Involvement Program in the late 1980s. The report lists some successful projects developed by the Parent Involvement Program:

- Sports Night for Parents, Kids, and Staff;
- Field Trips: boar rides, bowling, sports events, museum trips, performances;
- Mother's Day Luncheons;
- Workshops for Parents as Educators;
- School Volunteer Programs;
- Workshops for Personal Development;
- Get-Acquainted Dinners;
- Parents Support Groups;
- Book and Toy Fair or Lending Library;
- Parents Visit the School Week;

[6] Fordham University, undated.

- Lunch with Mom: Nutrition Program;
- Homework Helpers Panel;
- Independent Reading Workshop;
- Class Mothers Breakfast with Principal;
- Graduation Party for 8th Graders;
- Awards Night for Parents Completing Workshops;
- ESL Classes;
- GED Classes;
- Computer Workshops;
- High School Career Planning Nights;
- Weekend Leadership Retreats;
- Tenants' Rights and Neighborhood Services Workshops;
- Community Fair; and
- International Food Festival.

Joyce Epstein has synthesized the research on family and community involvement in education to produce a framework of six types of involvement.[7] The six types are:

1. Parenting – the school helps families establish home environments that support children as students;
2. Communicating – effective two-way communication between schools and homes;
3. Volunteering – parents help and support the school in a variety of capacities;
4. Learning at home – schools help parents to help students learn in the home;
5. Decision making – parents are included in school decision making; and
6. Collaborating with community – resources from the community are integrated to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning.

Schools must make a concerted and ongoing effort to implement the six practices. To carry this out, Epstein recommends forming an Action Team, including 6-12 parents and educators. Most charter schools have some sort of team or committee that can manage the parent involvement process. A number of the charter people interviewed indicated that they had parent volunteer committees or other committees in place which usually included parents as well as school staff. Additional advice on how to proceed in each of the six areas is available from many sources, one of the best of which is the recent *Tool Kit for School-Family-Community Partnerships*, from the Washington State School Directors' Association (ordering information under *Resources* at the end of this section).

> *[Parent involvement is] ongoing; when we started the school parents were instrumental in starting it. It came out of them. But you lose some of these original parents, so it's evolving. Schools need to be flexible, to be able to change strategies to fit changing situations.*
> – Marianne Lay, Cape Cod Lighthouse School, Orleans, MA

What follows are details on parent involvement in each of Epstein's six areas, along with a seventh, families as resources for the school curriculum. The authors believe there are a number of good reasons for involving families

[7] l involvement, from the 1997 book School, Family, and Community
mission, as appendix number 2.

in school curriculum, and that this deserves inclusion as a seventh type of involvement.

1. Parenting

There are a number of steps schools can take to help encourage parents establish home environments that support children as students. It is generally agreed that children learn more when they "get sufficient rest, are fed an ample and nutritious diet, get to school regularly and on time, are dressed appropriately for the weather, have clean clothes to wear, and have a quiet and well-lit place to work at home".[8] Sometimes parents just need reminders of the importance of these items. In some communities higher numbers of families which are a major constituency for many charter schools may have difficulty meeting these needs.

To help families meet basic needs, schools can build connections with public and private human services providers. The National PTA suggests developing a directory of local social and community service agencies that describes the services each provides, and contact information. In many communities, directories already exist available from county social services, social workers or community education departments.[9] Such directories can be provided directly to parents, or school staff may help make needed contacts. Education researcher Susan McAllister Swap suggests that elementary schools may arrange for workshops to parents, on topics such as nutrition, changing needs of children as they grow, and coping with children's eating or sleeping problems. In addition to sharing information, such workshops may help parents create a useful support network among each other.[10]

Some schools have organized clothing exchanges, particularly for winter clothes. Community education may provide parenting classes with practical suggestions and opportunities for sharing ideas. Some even provide care for the children while the parent attends the session.

2. Communicating

Effective two-way communication between schools and homes is crucial for real partnerships. A recent National PTA publication emphasizes the need for *all* school staff to be involved in creating a friendly, welcoming environment for parents at the school. In addition to teachers' role, administrators need to provide leadership and support staff such as secretaries, custodians, and security personnel, "need to welcome parents with their tone of voice, body language, and friendliness". [11]

School-family communication, including parent-student-teacher conferences, is discussed in depth in section 3.

3. Volunteering

[8] Swap, 1993, p. 106.
[9] Further information that may be of interest can be found on the National PTA's Internet site, www.pta.org.
[10] Swap, 1993, p. 106.
[11] National PTA, 2000, p. 27.

There are a wide variety of ways parents can support the school as volunteers. Volunteer activities should bring in additional resources to the school while building a sense of community between the school and families. Schools may recruit volunteers through interest surveys or other types of contact.

To make effective use of parent volunteers, you will likely need an individual to coordinate the volunteer effort – to distribute and collect surveys asking parents to volunteer, to determine which activities volunteers can reasonably do, to match the right volunteer with the right task, and to network with other school staff to ensure the process is running smoothly. Funding a parent coordinator is apt to be a challenge: few charter schools have ready funds to add another non-instructional staff position to the payroll. A number of options may be worth considering as you look for ways to provide for a volunteer coordinator. For example, one school found a parent who was willing to coordinate the volunteer effort, for paraprofessional salary. The volunteer coordinator could be a part time position, e.g. a paraprofessional who works part of the day with students. Some schools may have Title I funds available to pay a volunteer coordinator. Another option would be to find a volunteer willing to coordinate the volunteer effort.

The Minnesota New Country School has developed a Parent Volunteer Information form which all parents are asked to fill out, to indicate potential areas of interest. In addition to a list of one-time projects for which volunteer help is needed, the Information Form includes:

Information Form: One-time projects

Project	Date(s)	Type of Help Needed	Name 1	Name 2
Cleaning the school building	Daily and/or weekly			
Library Organizer	Anytime	Organize books in library		
Running off copies, folding	Anytime	Newsletters, programs, etc.		
Supervise students	Anytime	During the day or Monday nights		
Prepare students for ACT	Anytime			
Drivers	Anytime	Drive students to/from field trips, etc.		
Knowledge Bowl	Winter-spring	Drivers/chaperones		

Please check any of the following talents/interests you have or are willing to help with

Talent	Name 1	Name 2	Talent	Name 1	Name 2	Talent	Name 1	Name 2
Aeronautics			Crocheting			Photography		
Animals			Dance			Quilting		
Archery			Decorating			Sailing		
Architecture			Electrical			Science		
Art			Environment			Sewing		
Boating			Etiquette			Sheet rocking		
Camping			Farming			Speech		
Canoeing			Gardening			Telephoning		
Car repair			Hunting			Theatre arts		
Carpentry			Knitting			Tiling		

Talent	Name 1	Name 2	Talent	Name 1	Name 2	Talent	Name 1	Name 2
Cement work			Landscaping			Traveling		
Cleaning			Music			Wallpapering		
Computer			Office work			Other:		
Cooking/baking			Organizing					
Crafts			Painting					

Some charter schools have developed contracts that parents are asked to sign to affirm that they will be involved with their children's education. Contracts may ask parents to agree to provide a certain number of hours of their time in volunteer activities for the school. If used, the contract should be well thought-out; school people should take care that it does not have the potential to alienate parents which could result if there was an unreasonable requirement for volunteering. Some parents need time and patience to process "tapes" from their own past negative experiences in school.

Education researcher and charter advocate Joe Nathan discussed the issue in his book on charter schools, concluding that while "it makes a great deal of sense for the family to be asked to help out the school in some way", is probably "not a good idea to *demand* that the family help out the school *as a condition of the student's attending the school*. It may intimidate certain families who have already had bad experiences with the schools to be told they must give a certain number of hours of volunteer time if their youngsters are to be allowed in the charter school" (Nathan, 1996, p. 153). Such a contract would also likely not stand up if challenged in court.

A number of charters use written parent agreements

The Urban League of Pittsburgh Charter School requires parents to sign a contract committing themselves to 30 hours of volunteer work/year. At Massachusetts' Cape Cod Lighthouse School, parents sign a contract when they enroll their children which commits them to 3 hours of volunteer time per month. However, our contact added, " Enforcing the contracts is the difficult part. Some parents can be here all the time, others find it hard to give 5 minutes." The Exploris Middle School of Raleigh, NC, asks parents to volunteer for four hours per month.

Contact information: Urban League Charter School is at 327 N. Negley Ave.; Pittsburgh, PA 15206. The Cape Code Lighthouse school is at P.O. Box 1959; Orleans , MA 02653, and on the Internet at http://www.lighthouse.chtr.k12.ma.us. The Exploris Middle School is at 207 E. Hargett St.; Raleigh, NC 27601, and on the Internet at http://www.exploris.org/learn/ems/index.html

An alternative to the parent contract is the "learning compact," a document which describes how all members of the school community agree to share in responsibility for student learning (such a document could also be known as a "parent agreement" or another, less legal-sounding term). Federal legislation requires parent compacts to be developed by schools receiving Title I funds. A description of the process of developing a compact, including worksheets and examples of several schools' completed compacts, can be found on the U.S. Department of Education's website, at http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Compact/. See also Appendix 1, with Home-School Compact materials from the Washington State School Directors' Association's *Tool Kit for School-Family-Community Partnerships*. This includes recommendations for developing a compact, and example compacts from two schools.

The authors' contact at the Seashore Living Center in Texas commented that "[pull quote: We can't require them to do anything, but we strongly encourage them. It becomes a chain reaction. Once we get the motivated parents involved – others get interested."]

What are some of the ways parents may be asked to volunteer? The Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota has provided the following list of 50 parent/community involvement opportunities:

Ways to Show Appreciation to Volunteers

- Greet the volunteer by name; encourage students to use the volunteer's name;
- Thank the volunteer personally each day, noting special contributions;
- Set a time to talk with the volunteer when children are not present; speak briefly with the volunteer each day before departure;
- Use the volunteer's special talents, knowledge, and interests in assigning tasks;
- Give the volunteer increasing responsibilities and more challenging tasks;
- Share articles and books of mutual interest--on child development, learning styles, or content areas in which the volunteer works;
- Include the volunteer when planning class activities;
- Send a letter of appreciation;
- Take the volunteer to lunch;
- Call or write when the volunteer is absent or ill;
- Invite experienced volunteers to train newer volunteers;
- Write an article on the volunteer's contributions for your volunteer newsletter, school newspaper, or community paper;
- Ask volunteers to help evaluate programs and suggest improvements;
- Ask the children to evaluate the performance of volunteers; share their comments with the volunteers;
- Accommodate the volunteer's personal needs and problems; and
- Encourage the volunteer to grow on the job.

Assist at the School

1. Share information with a student or class about a hobby;
2. Share information with a student or class about a career;
3. Share information with students about a country in which you have lived or visited;
4. Tutor one or a small group of students in reading, math or other areas;
5. Help coach an athletic team;
6. Help check a student's written work;
7. Help publish a school or classroom newsletter (this can also be done at home);
8. Help sew or paint a display;
9. Help build something (such as a loft in a classroom);
10. Help students work on a final exhibition or project (this can also be done at home or at a work place);

11. Help answer the school phone;
12. Help plan and/or build a new playground for the school;
13. Help plan a theme-based presentation for students;
14. Help present a them-based program for students;
15. Demonstrate cooking from a particular country or culture to students;
16. Share a skill with the faculty;
17. Help students plan and build an outdoor garden or other project which beautifies the school;
18. Help coach students for academic competitions such as Odyssey of the Mind or Math Masters; and
19. Bring senior citizens to school to watch a student production.

Extend Learning by Helping to Arrange Experiences in the Community

1. Help set up a student internship at your business, organization or agency;
2. Host a one day *shadow study* about your business or organization for one or a small group of students;
3. Go on a local field trip with a teacher and a group of students;
4. Go on an extended (3-5 day) cross country field trip with a teacher and students;
5. Contact a local business or organization regarding possible cooperation; and
6. Help create a natural area/learning space outside the building.

Serve on an Advisory or Decision-Making Committee

1. Volunteer for the schoolwide site council;
2. Serve on a school committee which reports to the site council;
3. Represent the school on a district committee;
4. Serve as an officer on the school's PTA;
5. Help organize a parent organization for the school;
6. Help design a parent and/or student survey for the school; or
7. Help conduct and/or tabulate the results of a parent survey regarding the school.

Increase Financial Resources Available to the School

1. Help write a proposal which will bring new resources to the school;
2. Donate materials to the school;
3. Arrange for a business or other organization to donate materials to the school; and
4. Help with a fund-raising campaign for the school.

Share Information

1. Serve as a member of a *telephone tree* to help distribute information quickly;
2. Write a letter to legislators about the school;
3. Write a letter to school board members about the school;
4. Go to a school board meeting to advocate for the school;
5. Go to another school to provide information about your school;
6. Help create a brochure or booklet about the school;
7. Help translate information about the school into a language other than English;

8. Help translate at a parent/teacher conference for people who don't speak English well;
9. Provide transportation to a parent/teacher conference for a parent who needs a ride;
10. Write an article about school activities for publication; or
11. Arrange for a political leader (mayor, council member, state representative, etc.) to visit the school.

Help Other Parents Develop Parenting Skills

1. Teach or help with a class on ways to be stronger parents;
2. Help produce a video tape on ways to be effective parents; and
3. Help write, publish and distribute a list of parenting tips.

We conclude with a cautionary note. It may be possible to have too much parent involvement, or involvement of the wrong kind. Education researcher and former classroom teacher Cheryl J. Craig has described a school in which all the teachers were expected to use parents as volunteers in their classrooms in order to "keep the parents happy," regardless of whether particular parents were appropriate for classroom activities.[12] In this situation the parent volunteers actually began to distract teachers from their primary mission of fostering learning in students.

Here are some strategies for dealing with, or avoiding, this kind of situation:

- Approach parents privately, to give them feedback on negative impacts of their actions (someone who knows the parent well and has good rapport with him or her should do this).
- Consider appointing parents to a committee, that does useful work but takes them out of the mainstream of school activities.
- At meetings, use a "participation scorecard" to track who is speaking and point out the excessive involvement of some.
- Establish ground rules for how much or what types of parent involvement are desired. This could be specified in a parent or school handbook, or in committee guidelines.
- Conduct confidential parent surveys to ask what is working and what is not in parent involvement.
- Make sure your school has areas set aside for staff-only discussion. Staff should have space away from parents and others for discussion of instructional, assessment, or behavior management issues, and simply for "down time."

4. Learning at home

In addition to meeting children's basic needs, parents can promote learning through a wide variety of home activities. Swap points out that "There is widespread agreement that parents can support their children's learning by reading aloud, providing an environment that is rich in print materials, talking to their child about events and experiences, encouraging their child's interests, taking the child to interesting places, and exploiting the wide range of ordinarily occurring home and community activities for their learning potential". [13]

[12] Craig, 1998.
[13] Swap, 1993, p. 107.

A number of resources are easily available to help with home learning activities:

- *Parents as Partners* series from the American Association of School Administrators (703 528-0700; http://www.aasa.org). Titles include *Getting Your Child Ready for School, Helping Your Child Succeed in Elementary School, Helping Your Child Succeed in Middle and High School, Helping Your Child With Homework, Parents: Partners in Education*, and *Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Skills: Keys to Your Child's School Success*. These booklets are available from the AASA at minimal cost, with quantity discounts.

- *Mega Skills: Building Children's Achievement for the Information Age*, by Dorothy Rich, especially Section B, on "Teaching Mega Skills at Home." This provides dozens of activities parents can do with children aged 4-12, to help them grow in the eleven Mega Skills areas (confidence; motivation; effort; responsibility; initiative; perseverance; caring; teamwork; common sense; problem solving; and focus).

- The Developmental Studies Center in Oakland, California, has published excellent bilingual English/Spanish learning materials which can be given to parents of elementary school students (510 533-0213; http://www.devstu.org).

- *Family Education Today* is a magazine (online and in print) that provides practical advice for parents, relating to helping their children learn (800 927-6006 x1999; or http://familyeducation.com/today).

- Learning Fundamentals is another organization that offers resources for schools seeking to build parent support for learning (800 925-7853). Their products include a set of "Parent Connection" materials for educators to use in leading meetings with parents on topics such as motivating your child to learn, learning math at home, stretching young minds in the summertime, and encouraging good homework habits.

- *Tool Kit for School-Family-Community Partnerships*, from the Washington State School Directors Association (360 493-9231). This large binder has many resources to help schools help parents with learning at home. The Tool Kit is organized around Epstein's framework of six types of involvement – see especially the section on *Learning at Home.*

- The U.S. Department of Education's guide to *Reaching All Families* includes a section on "Homework and Home Learning," with suggestions of strategies teachers can use to make school expectations clear and encourage parents to help promote learning outside of school. This is available electronically at http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ReachFam/oncom.html. Another U.S. Department of Education resource, this one intended for primarily for parents, is the *Helping Your Child* series, available at http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents/hyc.html. This includes booklets for parents to use in helping their children with various areas of the school curriculum. *Helping Your Child* booklets are available free over the Internet.

The *Massachusetts Charter School Handbook* provides a list of suggestions of ways to develop support for education at home (Charter School Resource Center, 1999, p. 22):

- Provide a list of materials needed for school work and request that a quiet place for work or study be established at home;
- Establish classroom libraries, send books home, and ask families to read to children at home;
- Provide a book list that families might use when purchasing gifts for children;
- Create a book lending library at the school from which parents may borrow books; and
- Write a brief guide listing fun and educational activities in the community that families might enjoy

Schools may sponsor workshops for parents on how to support learning in the home, and may sponsor home read-aloud programs or programs promoting student reading outside of school hours.

Minnesota educator and charter school founder Wayne B. Jennings provides the following list of items parents can do to raise the academic achievement and personal competence of their children:

1. Let children see you learning and how it excites you! Your child should see that learning is going on all around them.

2. Learn something together with your child e.g. a hobby, a recreational activity, or a domestic project -- and talk about the learning process as you both concentrate on the goals of the activity.

3. Ask the child to teach you something they learned today. This is the most powerful learning approach we have in education.

Educator and trainer Ed Porthan describes the "magic twenty minutes"parents can share with their children each day:

10 minutes in the morning on waking up and 10 minutes before going to bed when the mind is highly receptive to ideas and suggestions. Share time with your child during those magic minutes. Emphasize things that went well for them and activities they have coming up and their worth as an individual.

4. Ask your child what they did today that was particularly pleasing and exciting to them. Did they help someone? Did something unusual happen to them? Did they create something or solve a problem? Did they have a rewarding experience? Did it "spark" a further response for follow-up study?

5. Ask your child what they are looking forward to the next day. This builds anticipation.

6. Teach your child the process and importance of setting goals and how to achieve those goals.

7. Instead of buying your children things like toys, buy experiences like a trip to the zoo, a bus ride

downtown, or a museum, etc., to give them new perspectives.

5. Decision-making

Charter schools can include parents on their governance boards and committees or task forces. Alaska charter schools are required to have an academic policy committee which includes parents. In Georgia, a majority of the governing body of the school are parents. In Minnesota, board members are elected by parents and school staff. A number of other state charter laws require or encourage parent involvement in governance.

Virtually everyone will agree that parents should be involved in school decision-making. The form their involvement takes will depend upon the legal context in your state, on your specific situation (consider what makes sense given your school's mission and vision, also what your charter contract or by-laws say about governance structure), and perhaps upon the expectations of the charter sponsor. Parent roles in school decision-making that come to mind are:

- Parent involvement on committees;
- Creation of a parent advisory board that provides input to the legal board;
- Parent representation on the board (but in a minority); and
- Majority parent representation on the board.

If parents do serve on the school's governing board, it is important that they understand their responsibility to take an appropriate role in decisions that may benefit their children or themselves. School board members can only act collectively, based on decisions made by the board, and not as individuals. Conflict-of-interest rules may require board members to excuse themselves from certain board decisions, for instance if the board were considering hiring a parent's firm for services to the school.

Giving parents a voice in making decisions about the program builds parents' loyalty to the school, and allows for input from their perspectives in addition to those of professional educators. If parents do not sit on a school's actual governing board, consider forming an advisory board. The advisory board could have a general oversight role, or could focus on a specific issue facing the school, such as assessment, or the Title I program. Consider including members of the community with parents.

Of the charter schools contacted for this project, most confirmed that parents are involved in governance. However, Rex Brown of Denver's P.S. 1 cautioned, when bringing new board members on, charter developers should "Use appointed boards, not elected boards to keep volatility at a minimum."

We know of charter schools where the founders' vision or the approved charter for the school has been abandoned or compromised beyond recognition by later governing boards. You can minimize the risk of this happening by emphasizing the board's responsibility to run a program that is true to the charter. It is also important to help the board understand which decisions it makes, which the school director makes,

and which the faculty make. Designs for Learning, an education consulting and charter school management firm in St. Paul, conducts an orientation for new board members and provides a three ring binder for each member. The binder includes the original charter proposal, the contract with the sponsor, by-laws, the state charter statute, and a brief summary of Robert's Rules of Order.

Besides a formal or advisory board, committees or task forces can be established according to need and interest, such as:

- Publicity;
- Enrollment;
- Curriculum;
- Volunteers;
- Educational Philosophy;
- Athletics; and
- Fundraising.

Establish a clear understanding of the committee's charge and authority to avoid problems later. Be sure to include parents representing the diversity of the student body. For instance, parents of students who do well academically may neglect or fail to understand issues that impact students who have difficulty in school, "thereby failing to address curriculum issues that enable all students to succeed".[14] Wayne Jennings also recommends that, at the secondary levels, students be included on an advisory committee, as a valuable source of stakeholder input.

6. Collaborating with community

Schools, especially smaller schools, can enrich their offerings by tapping into community resources. Community partnerships are becoming increasingly common:

> Mindful of increasing need and decreasing resources, many schools have reached out to the businesses and agencies in their communities to supplement and enrich their offerings. Public and mental health institutions are sometimes willing to locate staff in schools, offer educational programs, donate space, or work in collaboration with school personnel to develop multidisciplinary student support teams. School-university collaborations can provide important resources for school improvement: student interns, collaboration in teacher preparation, and mutual stimulation of faculty and school staff.[15]

Joyce Epstein has suggested several forms community collaboration may take:[16]

1. Schools provide information for students and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs or services;

[14] Jennings, 1989.
[15] Swap, 1993, p. 133.
[16] Epstein et. al., 1997, p. 8; see also reprinted charts in appendix 2.

2. Schools provide information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students;
3. Service integration through partnerships involving school; civic, counseling, cultural, health, recreation, and other agencies and organizations; and businesses; and
4. Service to the community by students, families, and schools (e.g.. recycling, art, music, drama, and other activities for seniors or others).

Community resources vital to charter school operations

Exploris Middle School of Raleigh, North Carolina, shares learning resources with a museum that calls itself "the world's first global experience center." Other examples abound: the country's first charter school, City Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota, is located in a building owned by the local park board. ACORN Dual Language Academy was founded in cooperation with the national ACORN advocacy organization. Dow Chemical and the Midland Cogeneration Venture in Lansing, Michigan provide judges for the Midland Academy of Advanced and Creative Studies' science fair and governing board members. Philadelphia's Center for Economics and Law Charter School students create and operate small businesses with help from local consultants who work in various firms and industries located in the city.

7. Parents and families as resources for school curriculum

Families, in any community, will have a rich set of experiences, skills, talents, etc. upon which a school may draw in order to enrich children's learning. Swap describes a "curriculum enrichment model:"

> The goal of the Curriculum Enrichment model is to expand and extend the school's curriculum by incorporating…contributions of families. The assumption is that families have important expertise to contribute and that the interaction between parents and school personnel and the implementation of the revised curriculum will enhance the educational objectives of the school. This orientation has emerged for two different reasons. One of these has been to make the school curriculum more accurately reflect the views, values, history, and learning styles of the families represented in the school, particularly those of immigrant minorities and castelike minorities….
>
> A second reason for parents to be involved in curriculum enrichment occurs when schools can improve their curriculum by drawing on the special expertise that parents may have to share by virtue of their education and background. Interaction between parents and school personnel can result in, for example, the installation of a computer lab, instruction for teachers in the use of computers in the classroom, the addition of mathematics or science curriculum that is more

experience-based, the integration of the newest technology in a vocational training program, or instruction in music composition.[17]

This lends credence and respect to parents and cultural groups. They need to be valued as prized resources. They then see themselves this way – a great self-affirming process.

To implement the "curriculum enrichment model," school staff may wish to make a list of knowledge, talents or abilities sought in parents. This could be done at conferences or through other contacts the school may make. Data gathered could include jobs worked/career knowledge, hobbies, travel to other countries, or other personal interests. Data on these subjects can be stored in a database for teachers to draw on in designing curriculum. For instance, in preparing an elementary school unit on air travel, a teacher could ask a parent who works in an airport to come in and speak with the class. A geography unit on Africa could be enriched by students interviewing a parent who emigrated from Somalia. A chemistry class could be made relevant by a parent who works in the field talking about careers in chemistry and practical applications of chemical principles. Georgia's Stone Mountain Charter School uses a database of parents to keep records and to enable the school to identify parents with particular skills. A St. Paul Open School parent arranged for students studying *Tom Sawyer* to spend a day on a Mississippi river barge.

An education researcher and writer suggests, "involve the community in goal-setting through focus groups and town meetings…. Asking the community to think about what competencies students will need for work, citizenship, life-long learning, and personal growth sharpens the focus on improving instruction and assessment of students' skills".[18]

In our interviews with charter school operators, we asked them to respond to a checklist of six ways the school uses parents/families as resources, indicating whether each one was present in their school. Below are the types, in order of usage, from the schools surveyed:

1. classroom volunteers assisting teachers;
2. helping to plan and run field trips;
3. volunteers in non-academic areas of the program (helping in lunchroom, cleanup or grounds improvement);
4. part of school governance team/committee;
5. developing curriculum or curriculum resources; and
6. "other ways" (assistance with legal aspects, a parent who is a computer technician and helps train employees/parents, fundraising, planning school activities, employing parents at the school, and utilizing parents who work for community organization for connection to their resources).

[17] Swap, 1993, p. 38.
[18] Tony Wagner, quoted in Lewis & Henderson, 1997, p. 43.

The St. Paul Family Learning Center charter school (FLC) asked the following questions, via a half-page form distributed to all parents at the opening-of-the-year conference:

The FLC seeks to draw on the resources of the community, including parents, to promote student learning. Do you or members of your family have experiences (e.g. a career, hobby, travels) you would be willing to share with FLC students? If so, please describe below or on the back of this sheet. The FLC Parent Coordinator is preparing a database of community resources teachers and students can draw on for projects.

Experiences you or family members would be willing to share:

Name:

Name of child(ren) attending FLC:

How should we contact you?

The FLC is located at 1745 University Avenue W., St. Paul, MN 55104, and online at www.flconline.org.

B. Parent Resource Centers

One way schools can reach out to parents, and show their sincerity about encouraging parent involvement, is to provide a family resource center in the school. This would be a room or other space set aside for parent use, providing a wide variety of information pertinent to parent needs and interests. It may be known as a Parent Resource Room, Family Room, Parent Center, etc. As a definition for a family center, a recent publication offered the following. A family center:

- Provides parents with a room or space for their own use at the school and facilitates communications between families and the school;
- Provides opportunities for parents to get to know each other and network;
- Offers educational and socializing opportunities; and
- serves various needs of families so that parents and other adults can turn their attention to helping and supporting their children.[19]

Pinewood Elementary School, located in the small town of Monticello, Minnesota, included the following resources in its Family Room ("Pinewood Family Room," article source unknown):

- "Keeping Kids Healthy and Safe" – an impressive display of health and safety related literature.
- "Helping Your Child Learn" – curriculum materials for grades K-5 area available for parents to review along with information on helping your child with homework.
- "Understanding Your Child's School" – this area is intended to inform parents of the numerous school related programs and organizations that are available.
- "Out-of-School Hours" – brochures and information on museums, theatres, wrestling club, dance classes, scouts and such, as well as Community Ed journals from our district and neighboring communities are on hand.
- "Pinewood Family Press" – this display has a multitude of purposes. With its newspaper-like design, it will serve as a communication tool between parents and teachers. There is a "classified" section where teachers can list their classroom "needs" and parents can list items they feel may be useful in a classroom.
- An area for keeping parents informed of upcoming events is located next to an area where recent school board and PTO minutes and results of other points of interest are. Parents are invited to share information by posting education/family oriented articles and literature. Parents are also able to post their questions concerning their child's education.
- Finally, there are spaces in which feature articles and teacher interviews will be displayed.

[19] Wisconsin DPI, 1996.

If possible such a family resource area should be staffed at least part of each school day, by a school staff member, perhaps a parent employee, who can respond to questions or concerns family members may have. Kentucky requires schools to have resource centers and provides funding. The goal is "to help students and their families who face social, economic, or health barriers that interfere with learning." Public funding is provided for this purpose for schools in which at least 20% of the students qualify for free school meals. There are "family resource centers" for elementary schools and "youth services centers" for middle and high schools. The centers are guided by local advisory councils which include parents, service providers and educators; one third of the members must be parents.[20]

In its recent Guide for Developing Parent and Family Involvement Programs, the National PTA sketches out a somewhat more ambitious scenario for a parent center. The National PTA recommends that

> The center should have cozy places to sit and relax as well as shelves containing books, pamphlets, brochures, audio- and videotapes, games, puzzles, magazines, and tip sheets that provide information on a variety of parenting topics. The area can also feature a computer and software, with Internet access to parenting information. Provide beverages, a play area in the center for small children, a telephone, and if possible, a room with laundry facilities and a kitchen. Approach local businesses for donations of equipment, supplies, and software, and convene a committee to oversee development, operation, and review of the center. Advertise the center in your school newsletter, so parents know it is there and what it offers.[21]

C. Training School Personnel to More Effectively Involve Families

According to Lewis and Henderson, only 14 states require training on involving parents for elementary educator certification, while only six require this for secondary teaching certification.[22] Thus, most educators will not have had formal training in this area. Charter school administrators may wish to consider encouraging or mandating training activities, to help their personnel gain the skills to do a better job involving families. One activity the authors recommend is to require all staff to read and discuss the research summary (pages 14-19) from Henderson and Berla's *A New Generation of Evidence*, at a staff meeting early in the year. This will ensure that staff are aware of the importance of parent involvement for student achievement.

The National PTA's recent guide to *Building Successful Partnerships* advocates joint parent/teacher in-service sessions on communication, with topics to include:

- How parents can speak to teachers;
- How teachers, support staff, and administrators can speak to parents;

[20] Prichard Committee, 1999, p. 39; report available online at http://www.columbiagroup.org/99updates.PDF.
[21] National PTA, 2000, p. 59.
[22] Lewis and Henderson 1997, p. 17.

- How to ask difficult questions without finger-pointing and blaming; and
- How to effectively and inclusively communicate with all parents.[23]

A report from the Center for School Change identified four skill areas that are necessary for educators to promote parent involvement:

1. The ability to communicate clearly and positively with parents;
2. The ability to develop lesson plans that involve parents, regardless of subject matter;
3. Educators must know a good deal about the families and communities which their school is serving; and
4. Educators need to know how to reorganize their school so that parents feel more comfortable (Nathan and Radcliffe, 1994).

How can educators develop these skills? Again, the Center for School Change report:

> One question on the survey asked educators was, "What are the 3-4 most valuable ways to learn the skills [to work closely with parents]?" Educators had five options, plus "other" from which to choose.
> - 86% marked "conversations with parents;"
> - 63% marked "watching videotapes about how other educators work with parents;"
> - 52% marked "reading materials describing how schools and teachers work with parents;"
> - 39% marked "practicing and having conversation/conference videotaped so that it can be studied;" and
> - 38% marked "practicing (role/playing) in front of other educators."
>
> Other suggestions included "visiting schools to see how they do this," "observing other educators hold parent conferences," and "talking with other educators."
>
> There are many ways to interpret these responses. National authorities and educators agree that talking with parents is valuable. In order to learn how to communicate with parents, "There's no substitute for talking directly with parents," according to {executive director of the Washington Parent Group Fund] Joy Majied. She believes this is an absolutely vital part of preparation. [Director of the Comer Project for Change in Education] Ed Joiner agrees, calling it "critical that educators talk directly with parents, including parents from low income families, about their experiences in schools. Joiner thinks that these discussions should help prospective teachers and administrators develop what he thinks is a critical skill: the ability to empathize with parents, and to recognize that they want the best possible education for their children. It's also clear that many educators would like to see (via videotape) real, living examples, rather than just reading about them.

[23] National PTA, 2000, p. 31.

Most national authorities recommend that educators role play conferences, phone conversations and other forms of communication with parents. Some educators see this as an effective way to learn, the majority don't. It is not easy to get up in front of others and "perform." Many people are reluctant to do this.

Role-playing (and videotaping for later study and feedback) would be most effective in a setting where other things already had been done, and a high level of trust had been developed. Some educators suggested that role-playing be done, at least initially, in small groups within a class or workshop. This helps build skills and confidence, making it easier and more comfortable to do with others.

Epstein provides material for use in designing and carrying out workshops for parent-family partnership Action Team members. These workshops are intended to help action teams understand Epstein's Six Types of Involvement and to build action plans for implementing involvement. Contact information for Epstein's organization is included in the Resources section below. Much of the training will need to be designed and carried out at individual schools, based on each school's particular situation and population served. In addition to, or instead of formal training, development of skills at involving parents may emphasize self-study efforts such as teachers discussing strategies among themselves, talking with parents, and perhaps watching videotapes and reading materials on the topic.

In the interviews the authors conducted with charter school staff, staff was asked if they had received training to help them involve parents. Most did not mention any specific training. At most of these schools, interviewees said there was ample parent involvement, and the leadership did not seem to see a need for training. Comments included:

- [Staff have] received no training on how to involve parents. We have no trouble getting parents involved, sometimes they are "too" involved.
- Just doing it they gain experience.
- We have not had training. We are a new school, so right now we are just trying to get the teachers up to speed with the curriculum. We are small, so we have parent/teacher meetings, weekly courier packets, and always make phone calls home.
- [Staff have not had] formal training, but issues are discussed at meetings and on the education advisory committee (this committee provides oversight).
- African-American Family Services did an in-service for teachers. They did an evaluation of sensitivity, poverty issues, and why some things are different for kids.

The following "Checklist for Improving Parent Involvement" comes from the Winter 1995 *What's Noteworthy* journal published by Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, a federal education lab.[24] School staff and administrators may benefit from asking themselves these questions, and looking into ways to improve areas with "no" answers.

[24] Jesse, 1995.

Checklist for Improving Parent Involvement

	Yes	No
1. There is a place in the building for parents to gather Informally.		
2. The office has a friendly, informal atmosphere.		
3. Parents are not viewed by school staff as being deficient.		
4. Efforts are made to involve culturally diverse parents.		
5. Communication between teachers and parents is effective.		
6. The atmosphere in the school is not bureaucratic.		
7. There are clearly defined policies regarding parental involvement in this school.		
8. There is a school-wide homework policy in place.		
9. There is an in-service program for staff that addresses parental involvement		
10. There is an in-service program for the Board of Education that addresses parental involvement.		
11. Training programs for parents are available.		
12. Parents are truly empowered to make decisions in this school.		
13. Families are a priority in this school.		
14. The businesses in the community are involved in the school.		
15. Community involvement is evident in this school.		
16. Parents are asked about their children's thinking and behavior.		
17. Parents routinely work in classrooms with children on learning activities.		
18. Parents in this community advocate for children's rights.		
19. Parents are promptly notified about problems with their students.		
20. School staff are aware of cultural and language barriers.		

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There is preliminary evidence suggesting that charter schools are more likely than other public schools to extensively involve parents in their operations. The 1998-99 Colorado Charter Schools Evaluation Study shows from 4,000 to 36,000 hours per year volunteered by parents in Colorado charter schools.

D. Challenges to Family Involvement and How to Overcome Them

Schools face barriers in seeking greater family involvement. Some, such as institutional inertia or a belief in separate home and school spheres, may be less likely to affect charter schools. However, effectively involving families is an ongoing opportunity, and charter operators will benefit from considering challenges, and ways they may be faced.

Lack of staff time to take on new responsibilities associated with parent and community involvement. This issue has been addressed by Lucretia Coates who helped implement the Epstein involvement process in the Baltimore schools.[25] Coates recommends building the partnership Action Team activities into staff's regular work. This may require rearranging class schedules, rearranging the school day to provide for non-instructional time, or finding funds to pay staff for extra time.

[25] Epstein et. al. 1997, p. 30+.

Lack of parent time to work with their school. Often cited as the greatest barrier is that busy parents are hard pressed to attend meetings or volunteer at the school. Ways around this include scheduling meeting at times and places convenient for families. An informational meeting might be offered at multiple times, including during early hours, evenings, or weekend hours. Meetings may be held at community locations, e.g. a public library or community center. Another way schools can make parent participation in school events easier is by providing childcare and transportation or arranging for car-pooling. Schools can make available a wide variety of volunteer activities (see discussion in the preceding section), many of which may be carried out in non-school or non-working hours.

Reaching Hard-to-Reach Parents

Here are some ideas on how to reach out to parents your school is having difficulty involving:

- Ask parents what might be the best way to reach them, and draw up a communication plan using their advice;
- Reach out to parents, e.g. by offering transportation and child care for school events, offering to hold parent-teacher conferences in community settings, holding "coffee klatches" in parents' homes, or offering workshops on topics of interest to parents;
- Open a parent meeting with students singing or performing; then provide supervised activities for the students while their parents stay for the meeting; and
- Partner with community agencies to offer human services through the school.

-- from the Washington State School Directors' Association, 1999,

Lack of parent interest in participation. Parents with past negative experiences with schools may be reluctant to participate in activities at the school. To cope with this, schools can offer a variety of ways for parents to participate, hold meetings and other events at times and locations convenient for parents, and persist in reaching out to a wide range of families. To build interest in a specific student-parent-school project, an elementary school in Chicago used a "kid created" performance to demonstrate students' knowledge and build parents' interest and enthusiasm. The Mighty Acorns Parent Project, sponsored by the Nature Conservancy and a local Forest Preserve, involved parents in exploring and writing about ecological issues. To spark parent interest at the outset, students put together a musical production dramatizing their recent visit to the Cap Sauer Forest Preserve.[26]

Lack of staff training in parent involvement is another challenge. Teacher training programs seldom emphasize the responsibility of educators to involve families. Charter schools can provide training to staff, to help them build skills to facilitate parent involvement. Include building awareness of cultural diversity, techniques for improving school-parent communication, and information on ways the school can help meet parents' needs. Also, during the hiring process, charters may seek staff whose background and inclinations prepare them for working with families and the community. Training for staff is discussed in depth in the final subsection of this chapter.

[26] Vopat, 1998, Ch. 2.

Educators' perception that parents are not interested in their children's education, or lack the ability to help. This attitude, prevalent in many public schools serving lower income and communities of color, overlooks research which indicates that regardless of family income, cultural background, or parents' level of education, families make critical contributions to children's learning.

Class and cultural differences between schools and families. Educators need to treat all parents with respect, regardless of differences in background. Ways to do this include listening to parents' views with patience, requesting parents' input regarding their children's learning, striving to understand students' home situations, and carrying out home visits where this works for parents.* When families speak another language, the school needs to provide translators, and translate school communications. Where parents perceive that they are treated with respect by all school staff, partnerships flourish. The Comer School Development Program, a well-known reform framework, is designed largely to deal with barriers of class and cultural differences (information available online at http://info.med.yale.edu/comer/). Local organizations that represent communities of color may be able to help charter schools bridge these gaps.

Proven tips to increase parent attendance at school meetings include:
1. Have student performances or demonstrations;
2. Provide food, e.g. pot luck; and;
3. Have fun events for both children and parents.

Some parents' involvement may cause problems for the school. There may be parents whose presence in the school is disruptive, who are not appropriate for working with particular students, or who pursue their own ideas in destructive ways. A parent or parent/student handbook may be an appropriate place to state guidelines for parent involvement, stating what the school does to promote parent participation, and reciprocally, the school's expectations of parents who volunteer. Kathryn Shick, founder and chancellor of the Midland Academy of Advanced and Creative Studies in Michigan, advocates detailed mission statements, including "unit mission statements" for all aspects of the organization, as a way of keeping the focus of activities on what is important for the school. The Midland Academy was founded with enthusiastic parent involvement and support – many parents eagerly volunteered to work on a wide variety of plans and projects, some of which were and some of which were not appropriate for the overall focus of the school. Detailed mission statements provided a means of making decisions about what projects would and would not be pursued.[27]

Parents have more pressing needs. Families without adequate resources of food, clothing, and shelter are likely to feel overwhelmed with immediate needs which take precedence over attending school meetings. Through partnerships with local human service providers, schools may also be able to offer some services (e.g. health screenings, some medical services, continuing education opportunities) on-site at the school. The Tejano Charter School in Houston, Texas, for example, is a partnership with a social

* The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory has published an article on home visiting, which includes links to other resources; see http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa4lk6.htm.
[27] Shick, 2000; Midland Academy is located at 4653 Bailey Bridge Rd., Midland, MI 48640

service agency. The concept of *full-service schools*, which provide a wide array of services beyond educating children, is described by Joy Dryfoos in her book by that title.[28]

Parents feel powerless to influence the program. Lewis and Henderson report that "an increase in 'passive' parent involvement cannot sustain school reform." National Education Goal number 8 states that "Parents and families will help to ensure that schools are adequately supported and will hold schools and teachers to high standards of accountability." Parents need to be involved in decision making, so that involvement does not simply mean parents assist the school in only low-level activities. Most charter schools involve parents in governance in some way and thus may be less likely to experience this as a challenge. See discussion above in the "Decision Making" section under *Ways in Which Families May be Involved*.

Key factors in promoting parent involvement.

The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education provides the following tips, excerpted from a longer list of "keys to successfully involving parents in education".

- Hire and train a parent/family liaison to directly contact parents and coordinate family activities. The Liaison should be bilingual as needed and sensitive to the needs of family and the community, including the non-English speaking community.
- Develop multiple outreach mechanisms to inform families, businesses, and the community about family involvement policies and programs through newsletter, slide shows, videotapes, and local newspapers.
- Recognize the importance of a community's historic, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural resources in generating interest in family involvement.
- Mobilize parents/families as volunteers in the school assisting with instructional tasks, meal service, and administrative office functions. Family members might also act as invited classroom speakers and volunteer tutors.
- Provide staff development for teachers and administrators to enable them to work effectively with families and with each other as partners in the educational process.
- Ensure access to information about nutrition, healthcare, services for individuals with disabilities, and support provided by schools or community agencies.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of family involvement programs and activities on a regular basis.

From the NCPIE website, http://www.ncpie.org/ncpieguidelines.html#keys, reprinted by permission

[28] Full-Service Schools : A Revolution in Health and Social Services for Children, Youth, and Families; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

III. Communicating with Parents, Including Reporting on Progress of Students and of the School

The findings of the present study suggest that the content of school-to-home communications is important. When these communications contain information that may influence parents' perceptions of their children as learners, when they give parents a sense of efficacy, and when they make the parent feel comfortable with the school, parent involvement seems to be enhanced.[29]

This section discusses issues of communication between charter schools and their parent communities. Effective communication is particularly critical for schools of choice, and schools that may be pursuing nontraditional programs. First is a discussion of some general issues around building trust and rapport with parents. Next, communications regarding a particular student (including parent conferences) is discussed. Finally, communication regarding progress of the school as a whole is addressed. Most charter schools are required to do some sort of whole-school reporting each year (e.g., an annual report), a process which provides an opportunity to review the school's accomplishments and plan for the future, in addition to meeting statutory requirements.

A. Building Trust and Rapport with Parents

Communication is the most important thing. Parents are stepping into unknown territory when they are dealing with a new charter school. It is hard to have information readily available for them. The school must initiate the effort to get parents involved.[30]

Building trust and rapport between a school and its community of parents is critical if partnerships are to be effective. It is crucial to attempt to see parent involvement from the parents' perspective. What are parents' expectations of the school? Some of the surveys in the final section of this Guidebook can help generate this information. A recent case study of parent attitudes toward involvement at their elementary schools found that

> Parents expressed a clear distinction between what the school should and should not be doing. Although the school should be a resource for parents, it should not dictate to parents what their role should be. As one father stated, the school should not tell parents "what good parents are." Furthermore, schools need to realize that "parents have a personal essay prior to their existence as parents." In other words, the school should respect all parents and appreciate the experiences and individual strengths they offer their children. The school should be available to offer advice and assistance to help parents work with their children.[31]

[29] Ames, 1993.
[30] Cathy Moss, Stone Mountain Charter School.
[31] Wanat, 1997.

One way to defuse a difficult situation is to use active listening, to respectfully paraphrase what the parent is saying. This doesn't have to mean agreement, just that you've really heard the point. It means listening and hearing the other person's viewpoint and courteously saying it back in your own words, "What I hear you saying is…"

In dealing with difficult parents, a teacher must remember that they may be acting according to misperceptions or previous negative experience with schools. Usually, poor attitudes reflect poor communication. A parent's initial anger or aggressiveness must not intimidate a teacher. Politeness, careful listening, and avoiding defensiveness will usually help.

Efforts made by teachers are likely to be critical in determining the amount of family involvement. Joyce Epstein and a colleague have found that "the attitudes and practices of the teachers, not the education, socioeconomic status, or marital status of the parent, were the important variables for understanding whether parents were knowledgeable and successful partners with the schools in their children's education".[32]

A welcoming environment for visitors to the school is critical. As Swap puts it, "The key is avoiding a foreboding, institutional atmosphere and creating a more home-like, human-scale environment".[33] Most of the charter schools the authors are familiar with have had good success in creating a welcoming environment. Charter schools tend to have an advantage in this regard as they are newer schools, most are relatively small schools, and many were started out of frustration with the institutional atmosphere of traditional public schools. A charter school director from Pittsburgh commented that "Attending the school is a choice, and people want to be there, so most people are eager to get involved to help with their child's education."

In addition to having a clean and brightly lit building, here are some other steps schools can take to enhance appearances and create a welcoming atmosphere:

- Display signs that welcome visitors. Does the sign on the front door say "Welcome! Thanks for coming. Please check in at the office" or just "Please check in at the office"? Kids can generate signs on the computer, or sew them (if English is a second language for many parents, add welcome signs that reflect the language of families' countries of origin).
- Post a map that explains where the office is.
- Arrange flowers, brightly colored murals, children's pictures, other displays, and/or photographs in an entrance hallway.
- Designate space for a parent center and have coffee, tea, or cold drinks available.
- Assign a parent to greet other parents at the entrance of the school at drop-off and pickup times during the first week of school.
- Explain to secretaries their importance in supporting family involvement and brainstorm a variety of strategies for welcoming and supporting parents.
- Arrange for translators for parents who do not speak English.[34]

[32] Epstein and Dauber, "School Programs and Teacher Practices of Parent Involvement in Inner-City Elementary And Middle Schools," reported in Swap, 1993, p. 65.
[33] Swap, 1993, p. 69.
[34] list taken from Swap, 1993, p. 69.

A more extensive list of specific steps you can take to make your school a "welcoming school" is provided in a recent report on the state of schools in Kentucky: Kentucky Updates: A Parent/Citizen Guide for 1999-2000 (pages 70-71), available on the Internet at http://www.columbiagroup.org/99updates.PDF.

Further advice and links to resources on creating a school climate that facilitates parent involvement can be found in the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory's *Critical Issue: Creating the School Climate and Structures to Support Parent and Family Involvement* report, available on the NCREL Internet site at http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa300.htm.

Specific actions schools may undertake to build trust and rapport with parents include, in no particular order:

- Hold informal social gatherings which parents, students, and school staff attend. The Family Learning Center and Concordia Creative Learning Academy charter schools in St. Paul, Minnesota, hold bimonthly Family Nights, which start with a potluck dinner and may include a presentation of student work, discussion of school policies, or an outing to a local event such as a baseball game. While such social events may not directly support student learning, they are an excellent way to initiate positive relations between the school and parents.

- Hold a special "welcome-back-to-school" event at the beginning of the school year. This can take the form of an open house, at which families can meet teachers and chat with them informally.

- Make school staff easily accessible. The school needs to publicize information on contacting its staff, and teachers should encourage parents to communicate with them regularly. One way to facilitate this is through a good voice-mail system. Many schools have established voicemail boxes for all teachers, where parents can leave messages with questions or concerns. If going this route, it is vital that the system be easily understood (a direct line or separate extension for each staff member is desirable), and that staff return calls promptly.

- Teachers can offer to do home visits for conferences or other meetings with individual parents. Home visits have proven successful in helping schools reach the more difficult-to-reach families. A teacher who has been to a student's home will gain insight into the family's beliefs and expectations of the student, while also providing the opportunity to help the family understand the school's expectations including specifics about curriculum, what and how learning are to occur, and desired home support.[35]

- Make it clear from the beginning that parent involvement is important. Immediately involve parents in the hiring of teachers and the curriculum process. Establish a hiring committee - made up of parents and some teachers. Teacher candidates have to be interviewed by a parent and a teacher. Establish a curriculum committee - made up of teachers and parents. This committee

[35] Washington State School Directors' Association, 1999, pp. 159-160.

researches national standards in order to set up the curriculum (recommendations of teacher Betsey Douberley of Lake Eola Charter School in Orlando, Florida).

Involve parents in creating a school handbook

To gain the trust and cooperation of parents, it may be a good idea to involve parents in the development of parent/student handbook. The handbook would explain the mission, goals and objectives of the school as well as details of school policy. California-based charter expert Eric Premack has provided a list of what such a manual could address:

- A brief overview of the charter school concept and the school's history;
- Parent involvement expectations and responsibilities;
- Reciprocal obligations of the school toward the parent and student;
- Constructive suggestions on how the parent can support learning in home and families activities;
- A contact list explaining how parents can raise and resolve concerns regarding the school's operations and policies and suggestions on how parents can take a constructive role in identifying and resolving issues and problems; and
- A description of the school's governing structure and how parents may become involved in the school's governance.

Premack, 1997, p. 58

B. Communicating with Parents About Their Student

This section discusses several strategies schools may use to communicate with parents about their particular student, including conferences and report cards.

The parent-student-teacher conference is perhaps the most important way most schools communicate with parents about their children's work in school. Consider having the first conference of the year before the school year begins or at the very beginning of the year, to allow parents and teachers to get acquainted and plan for the coming months.

Teachers often receive little training for the vital task of the parent conference. High school principal Steven Enoch developed a set of nine strategies to help increase the value of conferences for both teachers and parents:[36]

1. Identify strengths and weaknesses in the areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

[36] Enoch, 1995.

2. Establish a clear understanding of academic areas where the student is progressing and any areas where the student is not making adequate progress.
3. Provide parents with samples of work that reflect their child's progress.
4. Identify the level of the student's participation and contribution to group work and cooperative assignments. What process role does the student seem most comfortable assuming?
5. Does the student think critically and creatively?
6. Review the quality of the child's peer relationships for the parent.
7. Identify two or three growth goals for the student.
8. Provide specific expectations for what parents are to do at home to help.
9. Take time to listen to parents about their child.

Community Learning Center charter schools employ the following checklist for students' advisors to use in preparing for and carrying out conferences with parents. Teachers, in their role as advisors to students, are to keep in mind that the process is about holding a conference *with* the child and caring adults (advisor, parents) not *about* the child. It is another good learning experience for the child: they think about goals, express themselves and demonstrate accountability.

1. Prepare for the conference:

- Check with other staff who work with your advisee; and
- Develop a packet for the conference, including:
  - Student's goals
  - Samples of work
  - Reports or notes from other staff (can gather at a staff meeting).

2. Rehearse the conference with students by role-playing:

- Students present their goals, learning activities, samples of work; and
- Students ask for comments and suggestions from parents.

3. Conduct conference with the student, parent, and advisor. Advisee takes the lead to the greatest extent possible:

- Have a comfortable, pleasant setting, e.g. right sized chairs, coffee, and cookies;
- Establish a time period for the conference, e.g., 20 minutes;
- Review goals set earlier (if none, it's time to set goals);
- Review progress toward goals;
- Review progress with samples of work from learning activities;
- Review attendance and handling of responsibilities at school/home;
- Modify goals for balance of the year as necessary;
- Determine other learning activities to accomplish goals;
- Describe upcoming events and activities;
- Discuss how the home can contribute to learning;
- Parents give their thoughts on student's progress; and
- Ask parents and students for questions, ideas.

Even before planning the conference itself, it is important for teachers to give attention to cultural barriers that may separate them from their students' families. A recent article outlined strategies teachers may use to do this, including consideration of differing concepts of family roles, expectations for behavior and academic performance, and cultural awareness. The authors point out that "When teachers are working with parents of diverse cultures and families of students with disabilities, it is important for them to consider their perceptions of family roles within the culture, including the roles of extended family members. Family roles should not be judged based only on personal experience of the perception of a normative group."

Teachers' expectations about academic performance and appropriate behavior may differ from those of students, and this can result in miscommunication. Student behavior "may reflect the value the family places on education, the amount and types of the student's household and family responsibilities, the family's expectations for appropriate behavior and academic performance, and the level of parental involvement."

Finally, teachers need to learn about the customs and traditions of specific cultures from which their students come.[37]

School director Thomas R. Hoerr has suggested that schools reverse the usual parent-teacher conference format, making the conference primarily a forum for teachers to listen to parents. His school instituted "intake conferences" at the beginning of the school year, in which teachers were expected to listen 75-80% of the time.[38] A list of discussion questions was sent ahead to parents to facilitate the conference dialog. Using these questions at the conference should help to gather data needed to help teachers understand students' family background and avoid misunderstandings during the conference. The questions included, in part:

1. Questions about children:
    - How does your child view school?
    - What are your goals for your child this year?
    - What is you child's activity schedule away from school?
    - How do you deal with homework? Do you help your child with it, or check to make sure it's finished?
    - What is your family routine at home? How does the family spend its evenings?
    - How does your child solve problems at home?

2. Questions about diversity:
    - What holidays does your family celebrate? Will any of these celebrations affect your child's activities at school?
    - Would you share a bit about your family's heritage?
    - Has your child seen family members in situations in which they were discriminated against?

[37] Jordan et. al., 1998.
[38] Hoerr, 1997.

- What are some of the ways that your family has worked to help your child appreciate racial or ethnic differences?

Positive phone calls are a straightforward way to enhance communication between teachers and parents. In many cases parents expect to hear from the school only when their child gets in trouble. The impact can be tremendous when a teacher calls parents to tell them about their child's particular accomplishments, or to ask if they need any information on the school program and activities. Staff can take 15 minutes for this two to three times per week.

The U.S. Department of Education's *Reaching All Families* guidebook suggests that

> To be most effective, parents need to receive at least two or three positive phone calls over the course of the school year. Some topics for consideration are:
> - introducing the teacher to the parent;
> - describing the child's curriculum;
> - commenting on the child's progress;
> - informing the parent of a special achievement or improvement by the child;
> - telling the parent of particular strengths of the child and sharing an anecdote about them; and
> - Inviting the parents to open houses, conferences, volunteering in the school, and other school functions

While simple in concept, a positive phone call program does require time and effort. Strong support is needed from school administrators, who must provide teachers with the time, feedback, and resources they will need to implement this program. Teachers also need to be involved in the planning

How to assure frequent communication from the school to parents

The Massachusetts Charter School Handbook provides a list of suggestions:

- Provide families with a clear description of school rules and expectations: create a Family Handbook
- Send home student work folders weekly for review and signature
- Speak by phone with families; be accessible at school for telephone calls from families
- Publish school newsletters
- Take photos of students at work in school and send them home as postcards
- Publish school calendars, notices of events and activities, etc., well in advance of the activities
- Send Student Report Cards frequently and on a regular basis; include written comments from teachers
- Schedule Family Teacher Conferences 3 or 4 times a year
- Create a one-page listing for families of school staff to call regarding specific issues
- Complete a family satisfaction survey each year.

--Massachusetts Charter School Resource Center, 1999, p. 23.

to ensure their commitment (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, available online at http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ReachFam/).

Individual class newsletters are one way many elementary school teachers communicate with parents. A newsletter can consist of descriptions of classroom activities, goals, plans for the coming week, and recognition of students. Generating a class newsletter may be an opportunity for a teacher to enlist help from a volunteer, to take on responsibilities for writing and editing the newsletter.

Report cards. While many charter schools have moved away from the traditional report card, with its emphasis on letter grades given in traditionally-defined courses, it remains important to provide some form of written documentation of each student's achievement. It is important that the report be easily understood by parents. If you report standardized test results or mandated state test results, sketch the context for the student's score (so parents will understand how it compares to other students in the school, to the local district, to statewide scores, etc.). If you report results on school-developed evaluation instruments, explain how the instruments work and what the measurements mean. You may have to strike a balance between a reporting format based on the school's unique mission and goals and the need to address parents' desire to know how their students are doing in the basic skills and traditional curriculum areas.

Appendix 3 provides student report forms from the Urban League Charter School of Pittsburgh and the Learning Adventures Middle School (LAMS) of St. Paul. The Urban League school serves grades K-4, while LAMS is a grades 6-8 charter school. The LAMS reporting format incorporates both the state-mandated Graduation Standards and "life skills" areas specific to the school.

Some schools rely on parent conferences more than written reports for conveying the richness of how students are doing. In one case, a school provided a narrative account of the student's accomplishments and status to augment the parent conferences. Some of the charter school contacts interviewed for this project said that rather than a standardized report card form, they develop checklists and narrative reports specific to school curriculum. These types of reports may change each term depending on the specifics of material covered in different courses.

C. Communicating with Parents and Community About Progress of the School as a Whole

Effective communication with parents about the progress of the school is important for good community relations on an ongoing basis. The broader community including the sponsor, the state, and legislature are generally interested in how charter schools are doing.

One of our interview questions asked charter school people what methods they used to report on the progress of individual students and of the school as a whole. The most common methods mentioned were annual reports, standardized tests including state-mandated tests, parent conferences, and

individualized report cards or student progress reports. Other reporting methods mentioned included reports in local newspapers, portfolios, public presentations, direct parent/teacher communication, weekly newsletters, and parent satisfaction surveys.

When asked how they reported to parents, families, and the community, responses were similar to the above, with additional answers including phone calls home, visits by assessment teams when the school is up for renewal, "portfolio days," and parent meetings to explain standardized test results.

Annual Reports. Most charter schools produce annual reports describing the school's mission, goals, and achievements in the past year. Many states require an annual report. Regardless of whether this is mandatory, doing the annual report provides a great opportunity for school staff to reflect on the school's progress, and to facilitate good relations with parents and the broader community by telling them the "good news" about the school and indicating areas for further development. A report can include many photos, charts, and attractive graphics, or it can be produced using a common word-processing program. The main goal should be explaining what your school is about and reporting on your accomplishments.

Your state department of education or state charter resource center may have guidelines for what is to go in a charter report. Minnesota's Department of Children, Families and Learning recommends the following "data elements" be included:

1. Student Mission Statement;
2. Student Background/demographics;
3. Student Participation;
4. Teaching Staff Information;
5. Parent and Community Involvement;
6. Program Success (and/or best practices);
7. Program Problems/Challenges (and how they are being addressed);
8. Accountability Data from the year being reported on;
9. Two academic goals for the new school year and what pre/post test will be used for measurement;
10. Two non-academic goals and what pre/post test will be used for measurement; and
11. Other school accountability measures.

Below are tables of contents for annual reports of three charter schools. The introductions to the annual reports are reprinted, as appendix number 4.

Minnesota New Country School, a secondary charter in rural southern Minnesota, had the following Table of Contents in its fifth-year report:

Attachments to the New Country School report included Learner Rubrics used by the school; a statement of school mission, vision, guiding principles, and values; summary of school finances; results of a student survey; an independent evaluator's report on student achievement on the Stanford Achievement Test; and a summary of current activities of the school's graduates.

The **Hickman Charter School**[*], a California-based charter catering to the needs of home-schooling parents, produced a 1996-97 Annual Evaluation Report with the following Table of Contents:

[*] Located at 13306 4th Street; Hickman, CA 95323.

Monitoring Learning Progress: Standardized Test Data Results; Learning Records; Mathematics Work Samples, and Student Writing Work Samples
Student Support and Activities: Elective Classes; Field Trips; Enrichment Experiences; Computer Technology; Socialization; and Student Self-Esteem and Attitudes
Special Services: Special Education; Remediation
Parents: Staff/Parent Communication; Reference Binders; Materials and Curriculum Assistance; Training, Workshops, and Conferences; Parent Training Needs; and Parent Involvement
Section IV: Conclusions
Section V: Commendations and Recommendations
Conclusion

The **St. Paul Family Learning Center**, an elementary charter school, produced a report on the 1998-99 school year with this table of contents:

Introduction
I: FLC Response to St. Paul Public Schools Charter School Evaluation Plan
II: FLC History
III: Student Population, Attendance, and Special Services
IV: Program
Adoption of the community Learning Centers Design
Individualized Student Tracking and Assessment Strategies
Parent and Community Involvement
Best Practices and Program Successes
Program Challenges
V: Staffing
VI: Evaluation and Accountability Data
Standardized Test Data
Stakeholder Satisfaction Data
Student Retention Data
VII: Financial Information
Attachments

Attachments to the Family Learning Center annual report included: an example Work Sampling System Developmental Checklist used by the school; a Personal Learning Plan Student-Parent-Advisor Agreement form; statement of the FLC's Instructional Performance Pay Schedule and Expectations of Instructional Staff; the FLC's Professional Development Plan Process; sample Personal Learning Plan Goals sheets; the FLC 1999-2000 School Year Calendar; and a record of staff development activities for the year.

School newsletters. Besides annual reports, another important way most charter schools communicate with families is through school newsletters. The U.S. Department of Education's *Reaching All Families* book suggests that "Newsletters can provide a steady stream of information from the school to the home…A quality newsletter may well be the least expensive way of informing families of school activities and expectations. As their name implies, newsletters provide readers with "news" in an informal "letter" style. They are useful when careful thought is given to: "Why have a newsletter?" "Who is the audience?" "What do we want to communicate?" "How should we present the information?"[39]

[39] U.S. Department of Education, 1996, available online at http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ReachFam/index.html.

A charter school newsletter may be prepared by the principal/director, teacher, school support staff member, parent volunteer, or other interested party. At St. Paul's Family Learning Center charter school, a parent serves as school newsletter editor, gathering material from school staff and students to put in the newsletter. At the higher grades, working on the school newsletter can be a great opportunity for students to learn about writing, design, layout, and desktop publishing, while carrying out a real-world task of benefit to themselves and the school community. Perhaps interested students can form a "newspaper club" for this purpose.

In planning and producing a school newsletter, don't be over-ambitious. It is better to have a single page that's completed on time and is well-done, than to struggle to find material to fill eight or even four pages. Most recipients won't read a longer newsletter in any case.

Often school newsletters will consist of items such as calendars of upcoming school events, the school lunch menu, activities carried out by specific classes, and profiles of particular students. In addition to these usual sorts of items, a charter school might include discussion of the school's goals, or progress toward specific elements of the charter vision. The school newsletter is also a great place to put tips for parents on ways to promote their students' learning in the home. One option is to buy a newsletter service with lots of content to choose from or to adapt. Sources for this include:

- **The Parent Institute**, 800 756-5525, or on the Internet www.parent-institute.com. Provides the "Parents Make a Difference" newsletter.
- **Resources for Educators, Inc**., 800 394-5052 or via email at rfecustomer@rfeonline.com. They provide a series of monthly newsletters that can be customized to include school-specific materials.

Something you may wish to consider doing in your schools newsletter is including a note saying "if you read this newsletter, sign, cut out, and return this portion to your child's teacher for a special treat/prize for your child." This can be an effective way to find out how many parents are really reading the newsletter. Once you know, you can look for ways to increase the number of readers.

The Washington State School Directors' Association has provided a two-page summary of steps to undertake in publishing a school newsletter; this is included in this Guidebook as Appendix number 5.

Parent meetings/school events. To communicate the progress of the school and keep parents involved, many schools invite parents to meetings or other special events. A regularly-scheduled event, to which all parents are invited, is a powerful way to build parent support of the program. Minnesota's New Country School regularly invites the community to student "exhibition" nights, where students demonstrate projects they have carried out at the school. The Cape Cod Lighthouse School in Massachusetts reports that ongoing parent involvement has been part of the school culture since the beginning. To support ongoing communication with parents, the school has a meeting once a year with all parents, and has community meetings involving the students three to four times a year. A school spokesperson reported that "at these meetings kids can give presentations about the work they have been doing. We also use this time to discuss community concerns or issues and try to find solutions, e.g., if there are community problems with kids' behavior."

IV. Improving Responsiveness to Stakeholders

The authors believe that one of the major strengths of charter schools is their high degree of responsiveness to parent and community needs. Many charter schools are started by parents or by community organizations. Virtually all are schools of choice, meaning they must convince parents to send their children there, in order to remain in business. In addition, charter schools tend to have more flexibility to adjust their programs. For instance, if parents indicate that report cards are difficult to understand, the school would be able to adjust the format of the report cards, unlike traditional public schools which may be bound in this regard by school district regulations.

This section covers parent surveys, including several survey examples. Next, we consider other means of gathering data on stakeholder satisfaction. Finally, there is a brief discussion of the process for using data gathered to inform adjustments to the program.

A. Parent Surveys

Surveying school stakeholders is a common and relatively inexpensive strategy for obtaining data about how the program is viewed. Once you identify the most important issues the survey is to address, you can make up your own survey questions or pick and choose questions from outside sources. Clearly communicate to respondents the uses and purposes of the survey. The four surveys discussed below can serve as a starting point. Surveys may be done by mail, by phone, or in person at school events.

A cautionary note about surveys: with small populations being surveyed, it is vital to get a very high response rate in order for the data to be meaningful. For instance, if your parent population is 100, you need 73 responses to get a margin of error of plus or minus 10% (this means that if 80% of your respondents answer "yes" the true answer would lie between 70% and 90%). For a margin of error of just + / - 5%, you would need 80 responses out of 100. These calculations assume no systematic bias among respondents. For instance, if parents who are most satisfied with the program (or those who are most dissatisfied) respond in higher proportions, this would distort the results.

The North Central Regional Educational Lab and the Illinois State Board of Education developed a *Parent Involvement Inventory* to assist schools in developing strategies to increase parent, family, and community involvement. The inventory is comprehensive, including 72 questions covering many segments of the school community – teachers, volunteers, advocates, administration, parents, and students. It can be used to determine differences of opinion or different levels of knowledge among parents, and school staff. It is a framework to begin the work of building a solid family and community involvement program. The survey is located on the Internet at: http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa4lk12.htm. The beginning of the survey, reprinted with NCREL's permission, follows.

CHECK ONE ☐ Parent ☐ Combined Response ☐ Teacher ☐ Other (specify)_____ ☐ Administrator	**ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION** Program Initiative Section 100 North First Street Springfield, Illinois 62777-0001 **Parent Involvement Inventory**
Instruction: Please consider each statement carefully. Check each box that applies *throughout* your school.	

I. TEACHER/COACH - Supporting the learning process

1. Parents are informed of homework policy by:

☐ a. Handbook
☐ b. Parent orientation
☐ c. Newsletter
☐ d. Homework Calendar
☐ e. Assignment Notebook
☐ f. Homework Hotline
☐ g. Special information sheet
☐ h. Teacher contract
☐ i. Other (specify)_____

2. Parents are given specific ways to monitor homework.

☐ a. Newsletter
☐ b. Parent-teacher conferences
☐ c. Interactive Homework
☐ d. Special information sheet
☐ e. Other (specify)_____

3. Parents are encouraged to monitor/limit television viewing.

☐ a. Newsletter
☐ b. Parent-teacher conferences
☐ c. Special information sheet
☐ d. Other (specify)_____

Parent surveys are developed for a variety of purposes – to measure parent satisfaction with the school program, to gauge parent knowledge of school programs, to determine the level of parent's involvement in their child's class work, even specific subject areas, to help school's set priorities, set goals, develop a strategic mission for the school, etc. Parent surveys, when designed and administered thoughtfully, can be effective tools to improve parent, family, and community involvement in charter schools.

The following is an example of a stakeholder satisfaction survey that was administered to parents by the Family Learning Center, a K-5 charter school in St. Paul, Minnesota. Parents indicated their level of satisfaction with the school staff, education program, activities, and policies. The levels of responses to survey statements ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Family Learning Center Parent Survey – March, 1999. Total respondents: 51

	Score				
Survey Item	SD	D	NS	A	SA
1. The school is kept clean and neat.		2	3	32	14
2. My child feels safe at school.		1	7	33	13
3. Students and teachers are respectful to each other.		2	3	27	18
4. Children behave properly in school.		3	9	29	9
5. I feel comfortable contacting school personnel.		1	3	23	25
6. Teachers willingly discuss progress of my child.			1	19	30
7. Meaningful homework is assigned regularly.	1	7	12	18	12
8. Teachers expect high quality work.		2	9	18	22
9. I am satisfied with my child's academic progress.		2	5	22	22
10. I am satisfied with my child's social progress.		2	3	23	23
11. My child's individual needs are being met.		3	6	22	20
12. Teachers care about my child.	1		1	20	29
13. Family nights are important for the school.		1	2	25	23
14. I am pleased with the education program at FLC.		2	3	26	20
15. The advisor program is important.			5	21	25
16. The personal learning plan is important.		1	1	23	26
17. Projects and active learning are important.				21	30
18. Technology is important for learning.	2		4	22	24
19. Field trips are important for learning.			5	17	29
TOTALS:	**4**	**29**	**82**	**441**	**414**

Another way to survey parents is through telephone interviews. In 1999, the Minnesota New Country School, in Henderson, Minnesota, called parents to assess their satisfaction with the school's education program, staff, and policies. Forty parents participated in the phone survey, which is close to a 50% response rate for the school. They used a company called Voice Poll[40], which automatically set up the interview. The school used a previous parent survey, which needed little adaptation for the telephone. Parents had to call in to be surveyed.

The most immediate benefit for the school was that the survey answers were automatically and immediately tallied. Staff time did not need to be invested in manually calculating survey results. A disadvantage is that this method would only include responses from parents motivated enough to call in. Another downside was the survey was not designed to find out characteristics about the callers. Words of advice from Minnesota New Country School about using an automated phone survey system are to factor in the characteristics you want to know about the callers.

[40] Voice Poll may be reached at 425 259-4205, online at http://www.voicepoll.com/, or via email to webinfo@voicepoll.com.

Minnesota New Country School
Parent Survey-Conducted 8/99

A phone survey was conducted from August 27-September 21, 1999 for parents of students attending MNCS. Forty-one parents responded to the survey, which correlates to an excess of a 50% response rate from families. You will find a summary of responses below.

90% of the parents felt their child enjoy learning outside the regular school building.

On an average, about how many hours a week does your child use the computer?

1-2 Hrs.- 5% 2-3 Hrs.- 15% 3-5 Hrs.-27% 5-6 Hrs.-20% 6+ Hrs.-34%

63% of parents think their child takes responsibility for the quality of his/her education.

88% of the parents would grade their child's academic progress this year as a C or better.

65% of the parents feel their child accomplishes more academically in school than at home.

71 % of the parents feel their child understands his/her work assignments.

75% of parents feel their child is learning to be responsible in this school.

90% of parents feel their child is treated as an individual in this school.

56% of parents think their child's individual program of education could be improved.

71% of parents feel in most areas of the Profiles of Learning their child has discovered an area of significant interest and meaning.

90% of parents believe projects are an effective way for their child to learn.

59% of parents feel their child is working up to his/her full potential.

79% of parents feel their child is learning to think well in this school.

87% of parents believe MNCS successfully provides an environment where their child is an active learner.

77% of parents are aware of their child's progress.

88% of parents feel their child's advisor treats him/her fairly.

81 % of parents feel their child's teachers and advisors have high expectations for students.

72% of the parents feel their child's advisor and themselves are partners in their child's learning.

82% of parents feel comfortable talking with advisors about problems that their child might have at school.

76% of parents feel that when their child needs help he/she can get it from the advisors and teachers. 89% of the parents think their child feels safe at school.

82% of parents feel their child has good friends at school.

76% feel their child's ability to relate to adults has improved because of experiences at this school. 81% of the parents feel that students respect each other at this school.

85% of parents believe their child is proud to attend this school.

83% of the parents would grade their experience as a parent at MNCS as a 'C' or better.

You may decide to take on the task of doing a parent phone survey yourselves. Phone surveys can eat up a lot of time – for staff or volunteers. Plan on making three to four calls to the same person before you reach them and actually talk to them. You may get better results if parent volunteers are able to do

the calling – parents may be more open about their views when speaking to another parent rather than a school staff member. Surveys should be as short as possible while still generating the feedback you need. For a phone survey, make sure it can be completed in ten minutes; five is better. Train callers before they begin the surveys.

Another type of survey is one that explicitly compares the vision (what one would like to see in place at the school) and the reality. In March, 2000 the following survey was conducted at the Learning Adventures Middle School in St. Paul. Responses were on a five-point "Likert" scale, one being low and five high. In addition to comparing the ideal to the present reality, it compared parent and school staff responses:

	Staff	**Parents**	**Staff**	**Parents**
CHARACTERISTIC	The extent to which I see these things operating in my school		How important this value is to me and/or my child	
1. Learners take an active role in the learning process. They are primarily responsible for the direction and outcomes of course content. It is interactive, experiential, and relevant to their daily lives.	2.8	2.5	4.7	4.2
2. Learners work in small groups of cooperative clusters effectively working together. Groups represent different ages and talents in multiage, developmental formats.	3.3	3.5	3.9	4.5
3. Learners receive immediate constructive feedback that encourages and stretches their learning potential. This includes multiple assessments, reflections and performances.	2.5	2.4	4.6	4.8
4. Technology is integrated into each effort to effectively enhance and support the curriculum.	3.4	2.7	3.5	4.5
5. Parents, families, and communities are vigorously involved with the school. They frequently visit to share expertise and to develop family learning plans. Community members use the facilities after hours as a Community Learning Center. Communications between school and families are supported by such technology as voice mail and electronic mail.	2.2	2.1	3.9	4.8
6. Faculty are considered facilitators who are empowered to make curriculum decisions to improve the school. There is a focus on regular and consistent staff development and faculty collaboration.	3.2	3.1	4.4	4.3
7. Decisions are decentralized by parents, faculty, and students. District personnel support these decisions, including financial and program needs.	2.9	2.8	3.3	4.6
8. A shared vision guides all school practices. The mission statement is developed and supported by all stakeholders of the program, and all practices are reviewed regularly towards programs and completion of the mission and goals.	3.0	2.7	4.6	4.8
9. A caring environment is sustained that reinforces the values of productive citizens in a democracy. The climate is non-threatening, nurturing, and multicultural. Learners assume school responsibilities and learn to contribute to their community.	2.9	2.8	4.8	4.9

CHARACTERISTIC	Staff	Parents	Staff	Parents
	The extent to which I see these things operating in my school		How important this value is to me and/or my child	
10. Learners have a personalized, child-centered plan through an advisor system and staying with the same team of educators for a period of up to three years. Developmentally appropriate and brain compatible teaching allows learners to proceed in ways that are comfortable yet challenging.	2.8	3.1	3.9	4.8
11. Curriculum is designed to make connections with life experiences. Programs are not presented sequentially or by subject matter. Learning occurs when new information is linked to facts already known. By integrating the curriculum subjects learners make and strengthen connections. Application to life experiences better prepares learnings for successful lifelong learning.	3.1	3.3	4.3	4.7
12. The school year is extended to provide flexible hours and more days of student contact as well as essential continuous staff development. It will also reflect hours of availability to community members. The schedule is more compatible with the needs and desires of our changing communities.	3.8	4.3	2.9	4.3

An additional sample survey is included as Appendix 6. The "School Report Card" from the Washington State School Directors Association's *Tool Kit*, asks parents to rate a wide variety of aspects of school operation, from curriculum and instruction to transportation services. Recent resource books on surveys include:

B. Other Means of Assessing Parent Satisfaction

In addition to surveys there are a number of other strategies you may find useful in assessing and documenting how parents feel about the program. One measure of parent involvement that a school should track is attendance at parent-teacher conferences and at school events. If all of your parents, or almost all, attend conferences with their children's teacher, this provides a strong indication of engagement in the program and may be worth citing in your promotional material. Another measure is rate of retention, i.e. what proportion of students re-enroll in your school from year to year. If almost all students (except for those graduating) remain, or those who leave do so because the family moves, this provides additional evidence of parent and student satisfaction with the program.

If a large proportion of the parents turn out for school events such as open houses, parent nights, student performances, etc., this too is apt to indicate satisfaction with the program. You can take advantage of a meeting attended by parents to poll them for their responses to various aspects of the program. This can be done through paper surveys or electronic response systems such as wireless keypads where participants can enter immediate responses to questions posed by a presenter.

Communications-oriented businesses, colleges, and universities may have electronic keypad systems available for rent.

One way of tracking the tenor of the school's relations with its community is for the person who has the most contact with parents, e.g. the school secretary or receptionist, to tally phone calls and other contacts with parents. A simple grid can be developed to indicate whether the contact was a question, request, comment, compliment, or complaint, and which area of the school program it concerned. A log of volunteer hours put in at the school by parents and other community members is another means of tracking, and quantifying the level of involvement.

Finally, the *focus group* can be a powerful strategy for gathering input on a school program. Originally developed in the business world for purposes of marketing and advertising, the focus group has recently become popular for fields such as human services and education. A recent book on the topic defines a focus group as "an informal discussion among selected individuals about specifics topics relevant to the situation at hand….one of the characteristics that distinguishes focus groups from other forms of qualitative interview procedures is the group discussion. The major assumption of focus groups is that with a permissive atmosphere that fosters a range of opinions, a more complete and revealing understanding of the issues will be obtained." A focus group requires a trained moderator with prepared questions, who sets the stage for the discussion and elicits responses from all participants.[41]

Charter schools use a variety of means to assess parents' satisfaction with the school

We asked charter school representatives from the schools we contacted for this project about other strategies (besides surveys) they used. Responses included:

- school makes frequent phone calls to parents,
- whole grade level meetings of parents and school staff serving that grade,
- meetings of school staff with all parents invited, which include the opportunity for parents to give feedback on the program,
- focus groups,
- interviews with parents,
- school director has a monthly get-together over coffee with parents, and
- feedback is provided through parent committees.

A focus group should consist of six to twelve participants; fewer may be insufficient for a stimulating group dialogue, while more becomes unwieldy and risks failing to allow all to express their opinions.[42] Before you're ready to do a focus group, you'll need to define the aims of the group: what is it you are trying to find out? For example, you might want to call together a focus group to ask parents their views on assessment and reporting of student achievement or to ask what caused them to choose your school in order to inform your marketing efforts. Questions for participants should be focused around the identified goals.

[41] Vaughn, 1996, pp. 4-5.
[42] Vaughn, 1996, p. 50.

The focus group won't generate quantitative information that can be generalized to the entire parent population, but it will allow you to find out in detail how selected parents feel about specific issues. Consultants can be hired to do focus groups, but this is apt to be expensive. With a little study school people can carry them out themselves.

Examples of recent books on focus groups include:

- *Focus Groups in Education and Psychology*, by Sharon Vaughn et. al. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996). Contains a good summary of issues around focus groups for non-business purposes, easy for non-professionals to use.
- *The Focus Group Handbook*, by Holly Edmunds (Chicago: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc., 1999). Another resource for beginners to the focus group process.
- *Focus Group Kit*, by David L. Morgan et. al. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1998). A more detailed introduction to focus groups; contains six short books focusing on topics such as planning, developing questions for the focus group, moderating, involving community members in a focus group, and analyzing results.

C. Using Data Gathered from Stakeholders to Improve the Program

Once you've gathered data from parents, students, school staff, community, etc., what will you do with it? What do you do with the myriad of scaled responses to teacher expectations, methods of instruction, effectiveness of the curriculum, appropriateness of assessments? You use it to change, refine, and redesign your program, goals, and strategies.

One charter school interviewed for this handbook said that they did parent surveys to assess customer satisfaction. Staff realize that if students and parents are not satisfied with the school, the school is out of business. The same charter school said they used parent and student survey results for annual goal setting. School staff, students, and parents attend an annual summer retreat to discuss results of the surveys and major issues developed by staff. Students and parents give feed back and design solutions to issues raised by surveys and school staff. All present compare recommended solutions and come to a compromise.

When asked how they used data from stakeholders to improve their schools, other charter schools interviewed responded:

- We use data gathered on parent satisfaction for teacher evaluations. The data will impact policies and procedures of the school.
- The director of the school uses data gathered to address parent concerns and to implement new measures that are needed.
- Our school uses data in planning sessions and redefining committees.
- We use data to improve school programming.
- We've developed a survey including questions regarding school climate, curriculum, school development, and parent involvement and use the results to work on efforts to meet our annual goals.

- We implement some suggestions and ideas, and, as a result, have written grants to expand resources for parents in our school.
- Our school uses data gathered to improve communication with parents.
- We take seriously suggestions from parents to improve our methods – if parents aren't happy with what we do, we'll lose their children as our students. It's in our best interest to continuously improve what we do to keep our students.

Everything Hickman Charter School, a K-8 home-based learning charter in Hickman, California, does is parent driven. Parents determine curriculum, activities, assessments, on and off-site school classes, web-based classes, field trips, and enrichment experiences. Parent-teachers are provided with many opportunities to improve their teaching skills through numerous in service trainings, curriculum conferences support groups, collaboration, and networking – all of which they've requested and helped design. Education coordinators work with parent-teachers on a regular basis according to each child's school learning record. Part of the school learning record is a section for an ongoing parent survey. This is Hickman's mechanism to continuously assess and change their program to meet the needs of their students and families. Hickman is successful in meeting the ever-changing needs of its students and families through a truly continuous improvement process.

Customer satisfaction is paramount, but so is a school's mission and vision. Any decision to change a school's programming should be based on the school's mission and stated outcomes. Parent satisfaction is extremely important to schools, but not every single person or every single concern can be addressed by schools. A group of parents or staff could make decisions that violate the intent of the approved charter, which shouldn't be an option.

Data collected from parent feedback is critical in efforts to improve: school to parent communication; family involvement policies; services to students and parents, e.g. after-school programs and parent education classes; school – family – and community partnerships and/or collaboratives; school climate issues; and many other issues related to family involvement.

You may wish to specify goals of the charter school in terms of parent and family involvement. If doing this, be sure to keep the goals achievable and measurable. For example, a goal statement could say "XYZ Charter School parent volunteers will log over 2,000 hours volunteering for the school during the 2000-2001 school year," or "parents of at least 80% of students will fulfill the school's request for at least 20 hours of school service."

V. Resources

Here is a sampling of organizations that work on issues of family and community involvement in the schools:

The **Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships**, Joyce Epstein's organization, offers many valuable publications relating to partnerships.
Johns Hopkins University
3003 N. Charles Street, Suite 200
Baltimore, MD 21218
Phone: 410-516-8808
Internet site: http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm

The Parent Institute is a privately run organization that offers resources for parents on a variety of education-related topics.
P.O. Box 7474
Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474
(800) 756-5525
Internet site: http://www.parent-institute.com/

The **North Central Regional Educational Laboratory** offers an impressive range of resources on family and community involvement in the schools, including "Critical Issues" summaries of research on topics including parents centers in schools and establishing collaboratives and partnerships with community based organizations.
1900 Spring Road, Suite 300
Oak Brook, IL 60523-1480
800-356-2735
Internet site: http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/pa0cont.htm

The **Southwest Educational Development Laboratory** is another regional educational lab which offers a number of resources for building community partnerships supporting education.
211 East 7th Street
Austin, TX 78701-3281
800 476-6861
Internet site: www.sedl.org/sedl/community.html

The **National Parent Information Network** provides access to research and resources related to parenting and family involvement in education, including a Resource Guide on organizing a successful family center – see http://npin.org/library/pre1998/n00330/n00330.html.
NPIN is a project of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system and can be reached via email at npin@uiuc.edu.

Internet site: http://npin.org/

The **Center for School Change**, at the University of Minnesota, works with educators and other concerned people in Minnesota and throughout the country to promote positive change in the schools. The Center houses the New Twin Cities Charter School project, and their research includes a number of studies on charter schools.
Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota
301 19th Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55455
(612) 626-8910
Internet site: http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/school-change/

The **National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education** is a collaborative organization which advocates for the involvement of parents and families in their children's education.
3929 Old Lee Highway, Suite 91-A
Fairfax, VA 22030-2401
703-359-8973
Internet site: http://www.ncpie.org/

The **School Development Program**, James Comer's project, is a well-known model that seeks to mobilize all available resources, including families, to support student learning.
55 College Street
New Haven, CT 06510
203/ 737-1020
Internet site: http://info.med.yale.edu/comer/

The **CHARTERSCHOOLS Listserv/Email Discussion Group**, is an active forum for discussion of charter school issues including parent involvement. Participants include practitioners, researchers and other interested parties from across the country. Archives of past discussions are available at the listserv's website (a June 7, 2000, search for "parent involvement" yielded 148 postings, dating from the past four years, from the listserv archives).
Internet site: http://csr.syr.edu/resource/listserv/listserv.html

Federal Twenty-First Century Community Learning Centers program. This program exists to provide grants for schools to establish partnerships with other entities (e.g. human services providers, higher education, businesses, healthcare providers) in order to establish centers providing a variety of services in schools, operating extended hours. Another round can be expected in early 2001 pending Congressional approval, which seems likely as this project has enjoyed broad bipartisan support. Grants of this sort can provide substantial resources, but be aware that the application process is long and involved, and competition is strong. The program website has material that may be of interest, such as a database with information on grantees.
Email 21stCCLC@ed.gov
Internet site: http://www.ed.gov/21stcclc/.

Here is a sampling of publications that may be useful in planning and implementing school/family/community partnerships.

A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement, Anne T. Henderson and Nancy Berla, editors. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education, 1995.
Since 1981, when they published *The Evidence Grows*, Henderson and Berla have been at the forefront of research on the importance of family involvement for student achievement. This report is the third in their *Evidence* series. These reports are based on surveys of dozens of studies, reviews, reports, analyses and books on family involvement initiatives in schools across the country. *A New Generation* begins with a powerful summary of what the research shows about the efficacy of family involvement, then goes on to summarize each of the programs reviewed.

Reaching All Families: Creating Family-Friendly Schools, U.S. Department of Education. Washington: ED, 1996.
Designed for school administrators & teachers in their efforts to involve parents & families as more active participants in their children's education. Goes through steps school people can take, e.g. preparing handbooks, carrying out home visits, how to do conferences, "positive phone calls," and parent workshops. Suggested strategies are appropriate for all students, including students with special needs. Available on the Internet at http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ReachFam/ - or may be ordered from the U.S. Department of Education 1-877-433-7827 or http://www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html.

Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partnerships for Learning, U.S. Department of Education. Washington: ED, 1994.
Explains why family involvement is so important to learning. It summarizes recent research & offers practical tips to parents, schools, businesses, and community groups about how to connect families to the learning process. Discusses roles of families, schools, communities, businesses, states, and the federal government in promoting family involvement with children's learning. Online version has pointers to material on specific issues, e.g. scheduling a daily homework time, communicating positive behaviors, values, and character traits, making learning relevant to children, and reducing cultural and language barriers.
Available on the Internet - http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/families/strong/ - or may be ordered from the U.S. Department of Education.

Team Up for Kids! How Schools Can Support Family Involvement in Education, U.S. Department of Education. Washington: ED, 1998.
Outlines strategies for schools to use to promote family involvement in education. Offers suggestions on how to: learn to communicate better; encourage parental participation in school improvement efforts; involve parents in decision making; make parents feel welcome; & use technology to link parents to the classroom. Partnership for Family Involvement in Education Internet site includes many other resources for family involvement – see http://pfie.ed.gov/. Available on the Internet, at

http://www.ed.gov/pubs/PFIE/schools.html, or may be ordered from the U.S. Department of Education.

Building Successful Partnerships: A Guide for Developing Parent and Family Involvement Programs, National PTA. Bloomington, Indiana: National Educational Service, 2000.
The National PTA's take on what is necessary for schools to implement parent involvement. Follows Epstein's six types of involvement (this framework is the basis for the PTA's National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement). Much common-sense advice on how to promote parent involvement, and examples of successful programs.

Organizing a Successful Family Center in Your School: A Resource Guide, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Madison, Wisconsin: DPI Division for Libraries and Community Learning, 1996. Discusses the benefits that can result from having a family center in a school, and provides advice on establishing a family center. Available from the Wisconsin DPI (800 441-4563) or from the National Parent Involvement Network Internet site, http://npin.org/library/pre1998/n00330/n00330.html.

Tool Kit for School-Family-Community Partnerships, Washington State School Directors' Association. Olympia, Washington: WSSDA, 1999.
Thick 3-ring binder with a wide range of practical resources for teachers, administrators and other school personnel to use in building partnerships. Follows Epstein's framework of the six types of involvement. Huge number of resources, many of which are excellent, well-organized by topics and sub-topics. Local schools are allowed to reprint its materials for their own use. Totals almost 500 pages. Available for $79 from the WSSDA (phone 360 493-9237; http://www.wssda.org).

Urgent Message: Families Crucial to School Reform, Anne C. Lewis and Anne T. Henderson. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education, 1997.
Discusses parent and family involvement as a crucial component of school reform efforts. Includes many examples of successful parent involvement initiatives.

School and Family Partnerships: Surveys and Summaries, Joyce L. Epstein and Karen Clark Salinas. Johns Hopkins University: Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, 1993.
Includes highly detailed surveys for teachers, to assess levels of parent involvement and teachers' beliefs about parent involvement in general and at their school; and surveys that ask similar things of parents. The surveys themselves are followed by a section on how to summarize the data they generate, including interpreting the data and sharing the results with the respondents. There are survey packets for both elementary/middle school and for the high school level. Available for $8 from the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships (410 516-8808 or on the Internet at http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/ivory.htm).

List of Appendices

1. Home-School Compact description and examples, from the *Tool Kit for School-Family-Community Partnerships*[*]

2. Tables on Joyce Epstein's six types of parental involvement:
   Framework of Six Types of Involvement for Comprehensive Programs of Partnership, and Sample Practices
   Challenges and Redefinitions for the Successful Design and Implementation of the Six Types of Involvement
   Expected Results for Students, Parents, and Teachers of the Six Types of Involvement

3. Urban League of Pittsburgh Charter School student report form
   Learning Adventures Middle School Student Progress Report

4. Examples of introductions to charter school annual reports:
   Minnesota New Country School
   Hickman Charter School
   St. Paul Family Learning Center Charter School

5. "Publishing a Newsletter," from the *Tool Kit for School-Family-Community Partnerships*

6. "School Report Card," from the *Tool Kit for School-Family-Community Partnerships*

[*] The *Took Kit* author, the Washington State School Directors' Association, has kindly allowed us to reprint short extracts. Schools that purchase the *Tool Kit* are allowed to make unlimited use of its materials for school purposes.

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